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An ordinary interracial [double strikethrough] romance

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AN ORDINARY ~~INTERRACIAL~~ ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a literary novel depicting an interracial relationship between a Jewish-American man and an African-American woman. It examines the relationship through the first-person narration of Isaac Abramowitz, an anxious, drug and sex-addicted, alternately psychotic and stable, son of middle-class, assimilated Jewish suburban Angelenos. He meets his love interest, Naima Brown, as a teenager. Naima lives in the poor, inner-city Los Angeles neighborhood of MacArthur Park with her drug-addicted mother. Part of the challenge of their relationship is to find common ground despite their racial and, no less significantly, class dissimilarities.

Revision and re-envisioning the scope of this narrative has been extensive, and the suggestions of my thesis director, Dr. John Engell, have been critical to the development of this thesis. The result is a book extensively revised in terms of style, structure, and characterization.

The subject matter is important and deserves a wider audience. Frankly, there has been scant literary treatment of this type of interracial experience, and this thesis is an attempt to redress this silence.

For Teresa

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments ...

--Billy. S., Sonnet 116

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Introduction:

An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance

An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance is a novel about a romantic relationship between a secular, suburban Jewish-American man and a working class, inner city African-American woman. Told from the first-person point-of-view of Isaac Abramowitz, this narrative captures the particular dynamic of a domestic story infrequently depicted with the attention of a literary novelist. The unusual title, and the desired effect of the double strikethrough, calls attention to my primary purpose: to depict lovers yearning for freedom from the irrepressible psychology—often unconscious—of persistent racial typecasting in contemporary America.

The peculiar typography of my thesis, An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance, is intentional and, I humbly admit, audacious; fortunately, under the intelligent direction of my thesis director, Dr. John Engell, I have learned at least one great lesson about creative writing, and novel writing in particular: a good mentor points out weaknesses and instructs their student how to arrive at the correct answer; a great mentor illuminates the shape of the work and encourages their student to move towards the vision they see in the distance. If there are any faults in this novel, they are a result of my own peculiar insecurities. If there is anything of lasting value in these pages, if this novel's lifespan extends beyond

the diligent confines of the Graduate Studies Office's practical blue binding, the effect will be largely due to the indispensable momentum I derived from my conversations with Dr. Engell. I would also like to acknowledge the warm support of Dr. Persis Karim, my second reader and good friend. Additionally, I am especially grateful to Dr. Gabrielle Rico, who agreed to complete my committee just three weeks before the deadline, and whose ebullience stoked even further my wildly unrealistic ambitions. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the generous attention of the MFA Director, Dr. Alan Soldofsky, who even offered a bowl of homemade beef and carrot stew one late night before my long drive home to San Francisco.

An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance has many influences (not least of which is my own experience). However, I have had a great deal of trouble finding any literary models. *I believe this is one of the primary responsibilities of my thesis: to illuminate a romantic dynamic that has received almost no attention in American literary culture.* Nonetheless, I have certainly labored over finding literary touchstones. Shirley Ann Grau's 1964 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Keepers of the House, addresses the predicament of a black woman-white man romance, although it is not the focus of this fine book. Octavia Butler's Kindred features an interracial relationship of the sort I portray, but, again, it is a secondary or tertiary element.

My work as an ad-copy writer in Hollywood certainly influenced the composition. I have worked on numerous scripts—Saving Private Ryan, Devil's

Advocate, Runaway Bride, among others—and I utilize my familiarity with screenplay techniques in a recurring motif approached through the lens of cinematic indicators (for example, passages are formatted according to conventional script guidelines that, in their arrangement on the page, separate out Setting, Music, and Dialogue). Though many novelists have experimented with blending genres (for example, Joyce throughout Ulysses, but perhaps most germane to my thesis in the "Circe" episode), I have not been able to find anyone who uses exactly the same method I attempt. However, I don't believe I am writing a profoundly experimental novel.

Rather, the vast majority of An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance exhibits a traditional, first person point-of-view. On a stylistic level, my wide reading in the realistic tradition of John Updike informs much of my aesthetic goals. Indeed, the elegance of Updike's prose in the Rabbit Angstrom *roman fleuve* is a model I strive to emulate on the sentence level. As to my deepest spiritual affiliations, my most influential literary forefathers are the great Jewish-American novelists of the late 20th century: Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Phillip Roth. In An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance, I hope to emulate the imperial confidence of Bellow's Augie March, his Charlie Citrine, his Mr. Sammler; to approach the quiet achievement of prosaic detail one finds in Malamud's The Assistant and The Magic Barrel: And Other Stories; and to transmute into art the conflagration of desire and anger one finds in the conflicted characters of Philip Roth's novels from Portnoy's Complaint to the The Human Stain.

Perhaps more broadly, this novel is indebted to the probing of identity we find in the great African-American writer, James Baldwin. In Notes of a Native Son and elsewhere, I admire Baldwin's penetrating examination of what constitutes the American identity. How do we know who we are? What are the attributes that inform and construct our consciousness? How to explore in fiction the complexities of writing and reality, culture and race, stereotypes and individuality, assimilation and marginalization? These questions strike at the very texture of my identity; they electrify the very blood in my veins. They are my obsessions, and they lie at the heart of An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance.

The "seed," Henry James's term for storytelling's incipience, may have began in the summer of 1996, just a few months following my graduation from UCLA, I was hired to write taglines for Howard Sterns' movie Private Parts. Tagline writing is a sub-genre (if one can call such writing "genre" writing) of copywriting that involves reading a hundred and twenty-page script and boiling the essence of a variegated, multipart artwork into one punchy, pithy sentence. Although the agency hired perhaps five or ten writers to write taglines for Private Parts, I was fortunate enough to have my line—*Never before has a man done so much with so little*—selected, and it affixed every widget of the Private Parts product line: print ads for the theatrical release, the videocassettes, the CD, and the book. The agency paid me exactly three hundred dollars. In a three and a half month theater run, Private Parts grossed $41,198,146. I did the math. That means I was paid exactly .000072% of the pie. If you're an unknown writer,

you've approximately twenty-two dollars in the bank, you live in a shabby apartment in a run-down part of an urban sprawl, you're making a living humping fifty-pound bundles of unsold newspapers into the back of a Ford Ranger for The Los Angeles Times and, suddenly, you see your writing *everywhere*--in bus shelters, on giant billboards along Sunset Boulevard, in Rolling Stone Magazine, all over the country, perhaps in every big city in the industrialized world your writing blazes through the minds of its inhabitants like some form of aesthetico-capitalist voodoo, beckoning strangers to shell out their money, and *no one knows who you are*! Well, then you've some idea of the crass emotional motivations for my literary ambitions.

Copywriters labor for a stern taskmaster: the almighty dollar. Every client who comes to an agency wants one thing: more. Now! Whether it's pizzas, or movies, or new recruits, when you're writing copy, your main goal is to sell, and your main tool is basic human psychology. And if your audience—as in most big-budget movie advertising—is numbered in the millions, then the copywriter must aim for the lowest common denominator: the desire for titillation, for easy solutions, for milquetoast romantic love. Look at any movie ad campaign—whether it's the poster or the trailer or the radio ad—and you have a snapshot that reduces the allure of that particular film to its basic emotional factor. In the Howard Stern tagline, for example, the primary emotion is envy. Isn't it what we most of think: How can a schmuck like Howard Stern be so popular? The visual that accompanied my tagline featured Stern, enlarged to

mammoth proportions, standing naked in the heart of the New York City skyline, the Empire State Building shooting up out of his crotch, his photo-enhanced chest ripped into a Schwarzeneggeresque muscularity. That most people immediately recognize these images goes to the heart of our celebrity-obsessed culture. You can't escape it. It resonates because it's omnipresent.

But it is an easily earned resonance. And that is why copywriting—and perhaps even more poignantly, movie taglines—cut me to the quick, highlighting the gulf between what I was and what I wanted to be. Did I really want to serve up easily digested sound bites about formulaic stories?

I know my answer to that question is somewhat rhetorical. That is, I've realized my battle was with two completely different issues: economic equity and spiritual calling. I don't feel like I was treated fairly as a copywriter: I made a pittance, and, at one point, while I was writing copy for million-dollar movie campaigns, I collected unsold Times from the coffee shop in the same building that housed the ad agency. It didn't seem fair, and, then, when I became a full-time copywriter, I wasn't happy about what I was creating—spam, brochures for identity theft, ads for dog vitamins. But the truth is, I cut my writing teeth on the blade of copywriting; I learned that good writing nearly always achieves a fine polish through revision. I am not one of those writers who romanticize obscurity. Writers write to be read, I believe. And the rewards for good copywriting are similar to that of the novelist: to exchange the value of one's literary skills on the marketplace.

But when the advertising market went south following the terrorist attacks in 2001, I enrolled as an M.A. student of English at San Jose State University, imagining someday I might be an able community college instructor. In my second semester, I took a workshop with Dr. Chris Fink and came to believe I might find more opportunity in my professional goals through obtaining an MFA. Professor Fink accepted my thesis proposal, and when he left to teach elsewhere, I was fortunate that Dr. Engell agreed to step in as the director.

After reading the first draft, Dr. Engell made an indispensable suggestion: cut the intrusive narration. I had unwittingly included whole sections of narrative material in which the narrator basically asks the reader to be interested, to care about the story. Dr. Engell told me, "The details of the story are enough."

The resulting effect of this single bit of insight changed the entire quality of the story. Straightaway, I cut more than fifty pages, and when I had cleared away the extraneous posturing, not only was the pacing improved, but the narrative arc was clearer. I could see the story with more clarity; I cut a major character and added a sequence of episodes.

The second time Dr. Engell read the manuscript, he asked me to think about the thematic trends in the novel and about the manner in which I was to organize the division of incidents. His thematic concerns—was it a romantic comedy, a spiritual narrative, or a satire on corporate America?—helped frame my understanding of the major emotional poles of the novel. I considered what

apparatus would best contain this story—and I finally decided to divide it into three parts and nearly eighty chapters. The chapter divisions created momentum; deciding when to begin and end chapters created an implicit propulsion. I also chose to begin each of the three sections with material presented in screenplay format. And in two significant places, the narrative takes the form of a poem. The alternation of these three modes allowed the story to function on at least two levels—through a realistic depiction of Isaac and Naima's lives I could capture with verisimilitude the details of my taboo subject matter, and through the use of poetry and experimental screenplay material, I could capture the largely mysterious symbolic life of this taboo subject matter through an alinear, deliberately surreal presentation of images.

In The Art of the Novel, Milan Kundera defines the novel as "The great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some great themes of existence." The key words here—and for Kundera, "key words" are a large part of his aesthetic—are "thoroughly explores." Most formulaic Hollywood movies, and all copywriting, starts with something—the old bromides: dewy eyed romance, key words like "Hey you! You can be FREE! For less!"—and stays there. In this way, formulaic writing functions like a machine: writing becomes a predictable product with predictable outlines; it's like opening the Bible and only reading the Table of Contents. Hey, Genesis! Wow, Revelations! Well, that was interesting! Some will tell you that Hollywood studios care about the "great themes of existence," but go see Troy

for an example of how the world's greatest story about human vanity can be turned into a commercial for Brad Pitt, my old client. Granted, some directors try and make great art. But the vast majority, as we know, settle for art that requires only slightly more attention creating than they require of their audiences.

On the other hand, writing a novel—and perhaps all literature would fit under this umbrella—is drenched in the sweat of its maker. Homer's Iliad lives on after thousands of years. Thankfully, Brad Pitt's Troy has already been forgotten. An Ordinary ~~Interracial~~ Romance carries all the struggle and sweat I hope to have intimated in this introduction. I am grateful for the time and energy of my thesis committee members and the Creative Writing faculty at San Jose State University. I have learned much about writing, and even more about the mysterious, illusive process of writing a novel.

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i.

The Origins of Anxiety

I am in here.

--David Foster Wallace, Infinite Jest

Screentest #1:

The Marriage of Sam And Ebony,

A Blockbuster Flashforward

1. EXT.—CALIFORNIA RANCH HOUSE GARDEN—DAY

We are at a wedding. Dozens of people mill around at the bottom of a long, sloping garden. The garden is elaborate, sectioned into an area with roses and native plants, another with a grove of river oaks, and at the bottom of the hill, two tall California oaks cast a deep green shadow on seven rows of hay bails, tied together with red and pink string. A young girl in a pink dress, her skin a dark luminescence, is being chased by a young boy in patent leather shoes. Giggling, she runs across the carefully combed gravel paths and darts now behind a flowering purple ceanothus and a spray of monkey flower, the orange petals dancing in the soft, ocean breeze.

The house sits on the ocean-facing side of the hill. The big, sash living room window reflects a landscape of scattered houses, small vineyards and rows of Gravenstein apple trees, the occasional horse. On the deck, a jazz quartet plays a jaunty rendition of "All The Things You Are."

Camera zooms through the windows into:

2. INT.—HOUSE—CONTINUOUS

The groom, SAM, sits on the couch next to a young woman and a small boy. The woman is TANJA, whose face shows a bruised optimism. The boy is her adopted son, SAMUEL. SAM wears the uneasy smile of one about to stand in front of many people—however familial—and say 'Yes.'

SAMUEL (to Sam, eyes wide, mouth agape)
Are you gonna' kiss a black woman?

TANJA (smiling knowingly)
Samuel!

SAMUEL (still agog)
I'll give you five dollars if you do.
I want to see if you're really
gonna' kiss a black woman.

SAM squints, considering his response.

TANJA
Kids just get right to the point, don't they?

SAM (putting arm around Samuel)

Five dollars?

SAMUEL

Yeah. How are you gonna kiss her? Show me.

SAM

Show you?

SAMUEL

Yeah.

SAM moves to kiss SAMUEL, puckering his lips, and SAMUEL squeals.

SAMUEL

Aaaa!

TANJA (chuckling)

He doesn't want to know that much.

SAMUEL

Yeah. I just want to know how you

gonna' do it. You know? How? You not supposed to. So how? 'Cause if you do I'm gonna' give you five dollars.

CUT TO:

3. EXT.—GARDEN—DAY

SAM stands at the foot of the slope in front of a portable arch, red roses pinned through the lattice. SAM's UNCLE stands next to him. He is the officiant and wears a blue jeans suit, cowboy boots, and a leather bolo tie. There is a strong family resemblance in the dark, wavy hair and long, wide face. To the left, two MAIDS OF HONOR—their pink dresses as frilly and elegant as UNCLE's is casual—lean into each other and whisper, as do UNCLE and SAM.

UNCLE

Now's your chance to turn back.

SAM

And there it goes.

MAID OF HONOR #1 (whispering to #2)

Oh, I'm going to cry. I just love a pregnant bri--

MAID OF HONOR #2 (breathless)

Here she comes!

At the top of the hill, up by the house, the band stops playing "Summertime," and immediately begins the slow, processional melody of "When I Fall In Love." A figure in white moves, her face veiled, down the path towards the waiting assembly.

SAMUEL

Here she comes! Here she comes!

People stand, point their cameras, as our bride, EBONY, descends gracefully down the winding path, proceeded by the young girl in pink who tosses red rose petals; they flutter to the ground like snow.

There is a great clatter of cameras, dozens of lenses shuttering open and close.

EBONY

(We can see her smiling broadly through the veil.)

I feel like I'm being attacked by the paparazzi!

EBONY reaches the front of the assembly. EBONY and SAM face each other.

UNCLE (slowly)

Hello. My name is Peter Gunn, and I want to welcome family and friends to witness the exchange of vows between Ebony Brown and Sam Soloman. First, we'll exchange vows. Then rings. And then, to honor their separate traditions, Ebony and Sam will break the glass and jump over the broomstick.

CUT TO:

4. EXT.—GARDEN—SUNSET

Dinner is being served. Paper lanterns hang from the oak branches. People talk noisily, clinking big Cabernet glasses, and put their arms around each other.

SAM kisses EBONY on the cheek and gets up from the table. He walks towards the house, and is stopped by a middle-aged WOMAN in a forest green throw.

WOMAN (drunk, stumbling)

Well, well. How does it feel?

SAM

Are you okay?

WOMAN (barely standing)

Oh, I am. Your wedding. So beautiful.

Can I tell you? I was in your wife's

dressing room, taking pictures.

And.

SAM (taking her arm)

Yes?

WOMAN

And, don't take this the wrong way--.

All those black women. Naked. Brash. I felt so white.

You're a lucky man, Uncle Sam. I've never been around so many.

SAM

Why not?

FADE TO BLACK.

2.

The Invariant Bees: A Novel Chapter

This is not my voice. These are not my words. This is you as you sound in the voicebox of your mind, mixing. But if I were in here, you would know.

And therefore, I want to go back. Way back.

It was in my father's eyes. I could see his heart when I looked in his eyes. A hazel well; it wrapped the black prick of a mutable point with greatness. And as a very young boy, I gazed at this part of him with awful affection, my vision still fresh with wonder, the pail I lowered for water, and saw into his seeing, and saw what seemed like an irresistible appeal.

At the soft breakfast table, watching the way his long eyelashes fluttered while he listened to me blather on about Legos and Kermit and *Where The Wild Things Are*. The way he sipped his surroundings with careful glances like the world was fine brown coffee. The way he eyed me all over and asked me thoughtful questions about my plans, my goals for the next six months of third grade: What was I going to do for the rest of my childhood? The questions I soon froze in awe of, my tongue stiff with the immensity of the future, and gradually resented with all the rage of a murderer, the anger coterminous with the blood in my veins.

But then I saw further, and as a young man saw him anew, as precise and practical, as a man with a habit of honesty, with shadows under his eyes, with callused feet, with sadness.

And there was much joy, too: tossing the worn leather baseball across the backyard, a space now filled with fuzzy edged weeds and hedges and trees that rattle through the tunnels of memory like boogie-woogie cars on a Mondrian canvas. The ball, a plump sphere that planed the space between us, popping clouds of dirt and dust each time it hit our cracked leather mitts. Later, walking up Topeka Drive through the concrete streets edged with dancing palmate shadows, with quiet houses and swept driveways and flowerbeds of marigold and purple statis. Then cutting under the dark freeway tunnel, my father holding my hand in the gloom, and arriving at my earliest hometown's municipal greenspace: Tarzana Park. The eponymous hero even then casting a light on my father's implicit challenge.

When he and I reached the park, we pulled our mitts back over our hands and played.

"Isaac, use your legs when you throw," he would say.

"Keep your head in there."

"Keep your eye on the ball."

Baseball days filled many years. Begin your paragraph with a topic statement, my teachers always said. Later I learned the value of concision and writing for a specific audience. Well, my purpose is to please. My goal is no

goal, but the invariant bees. They sip past reason's gate, and make making we. Invariant are the bees. They be everywhere, man. We be everywhere, mama.

And finally, now that we are married, and my wife and I have just lost that which we can never regain, I make these marks as a reminder that when our creation does arrive we already have the courage to face it.

3.

Rabbit Hit The Ball

My father coached my little league baseball team when I was eight years old, and before the games he would roll up a joint while I collected the balls and bats and mitts, the cooler of ice and grape soda and popsicles, the clipboard and pencils and score sheets. By the time I was done, he would have his coconut out, taking great care to fit the roach into one of the small holes at the end of the hairy brown nut.

During the week, he disappeared in the grey room of business. Sometimes I would shower with him in the mornings. He was Goliath, and I doubted I would ever be as large, as hairy, as manly as my dad. When he shaved, I watched in awe at his courage: dragging the dull blade across his lathered cheek, the awful discipline of showering and soaping and shaving and threading his tie day after day. I saw him look into the mirror, rehearsing the hard scaffolding of yes. When he turned to look at me, his eyes softened. Then he'd pick me up and we'd look in the mirror together.

"Will I have facial hair, Dad?"

"Yes. You will have *great* facial hair. But not now. You don't want it now."

"Will I have facial hair like you?"

"Maybe."

"Will I have to shave?"

"Every day. You will shave every day. That's what people who want to be something do."

On game days, he wore blue jeans and a Ron "The Penguin" Cey jersey and seemed to relax. He coached third base, and he had a way of signaling for runners to try for home. "Go, go, go, go, go, go,' was the six syllable chant he furiously hollered as we rounded second base.

Afterwards, my dad and another father, a man with a handle bar mustache, would sit together in my dad's car and get stoned. I began to like the fragrance, and sometimes, when the Santa Anas were blowing, I would gaze out the car window and see the sycamore leaves dancing against the marble of the sky, a tempo beyond human range.

"Cey's an overpronat ed, overrated mediocrity. My son could play third better than him."

"You've got to understand," my dad would counter, "Cey grew up in the Valley. His kid played with Isaac in the Summer League." He always chose his words carefully, my father. Sometimes he'd pause for a good ten seconds before responding to such a broadside as the one Mr. Handlebar launched that day. "You have to understand the sacrifices Cey has made to the team to appreciate—"

"Whatever, man. All I'm saying is, Hey, when I take the wife and the kid to the game, I can root for Garvey. Garvey's a guy with Popeye arms, and a good demeanor. *He's* gonna show up for the team. Not the Penguin. Not like

that Baker or that other nigger, what's his name, that little fucker Lopes, who I love, don't get me wrong. I'm not a racist or anything—"

"The point is, Roger, if you look at the game from an analytical perspective," my father said, his batting eyelashes a minor retort to Handlebar's recklessness, and waving his hands through the smoke to no effect, "Cey's contribution to the team is greater than Garvey's."

"I tell you what," Handlebar said, scrutinizing the end of the joint, and taking two rapid hits. "Fuck the team. I just want to fuck one of them peanut girls, you know what I'm saying."

Handlebar offered my father the joint, but he waved it away. "Well," my father opined, "if you look at the evolution of the sport, you'll see how important concessions are to managing a successful franchise. When the Dodgers left Brooklyn—and let me tell you there was nothing like the Brooklyn fans, they *knew* the difference between Gil Hodges and Dusty Rhodes—and the O'Malleys moved west, they saw if they wanted to compete—athletically, financially—with the Yankees ..."

Stoned or not, my father's conversations with other adults circled around the edge of social issues, like Cey versus Garvey, and the chronic erotomania of young adults; however, my father carefully avoided indulging in humorous, man-to-man sex talk. Eventually, he would have a chance to do what he seemed to love, what would turn his long, pale face into a lantern, shining a flickering light on the relationship between, say, salty condiments and the geometry of the infield fly rule.

But because of the pot or perhaps a predisposition to dream, my mind would wander in these moments of inebriate chatter. One day, as I sat in the back seat after the game listening to Handlebar detail his mental portrait of Dolly Parton's breasts while my father discoursed on the hagiography of the batting helmet—and here is, perhaps, the only place where I lose control, in the constellation of these Phoenician boats, these sounds we share—I drifted. But who am I? Really. Who hears these sounds? Who feels these feelings? *If the doors of perception were. Abandon all. Enter here.*

Earlier that afternoon, I pitched. And I went the full ticket, not allowing a baserunner until the last inning. With two outs, having struck out all but three batters, I walked the bases loaded, and Harvey "Rabbit" Angs came to the plate, the biggest kid in the league. At ten years old, he was five foot six, though he wouldn't ever grow any taller. It was the last week of the season, and our team, the Heapers, had only lost one game. But Rabbit was a monster. Slower than a Galapagos Island tortoise, he held the league record for triples, twenty two; he could hit the ball farther than anyone else, but since there were no fences at Tarzana Park, he rarely made it all the way home.

That afternoon, Rabbit hovered over the plate, his blue helmet barely able to contain his hydrocephalic head. My first pitch was behind him and hit the green, wooden backstop with a hard thwack! He leaned back on his heels, took a few practice swings, and pointed the end of the bat at me, cracking, "Come on, punk. Hit me. We still win."

I threw hard for my age, hard enough to strike out most of the other players, including Rabbit. Of course, I thought I could throw harder if I wanted to. And on the next pitch, my two-seam fastball was flawless. I put so much into my legs and arms and hands and fingers that I didn't even look at the catcher's mitt when I let the ball go, pushing off the six-inch slate of the flat, white rubber, falling to my knees, and landing, head first, in the dirt to the left of the mound.

But Rabbit did hit the ball. He hit it good. Tarzana Park had two dirt infields on opposite sides of the grassy area. It must have been a good minor league homerun distance to the other pitching mound, at least two hundred and fifty feet. I remember looking at the outfielders as Rabbit came up to bat, guesstimating their confidence in me, their respect for Rabbit's power. Jason, the centerfielder, kicked the dirt near the mound on the other field, pounding his fist into his mitt.

Yes, he hit that shit. Over Jason. Completely over the other infield. Over the backstop, and the wire fence, through a session of the local dog training society, and into the street where the ball rolled until it disappeared in the fading chintz clutter of a rummage sale down Aron Avenue.

Even though he didn't have to, Rabbit ran all the way 'round the bases —twice—before the ball made it back to the infield.

I cried in the dugout after the game, and my dad said, "Why are you crying?"

"I'm no good."

"Nonsense," he said, laughing. "You did your best. Harvey hit the ball."

So later on in the car, when the pot smoke sifted through the air, and Handlebar and my father entered their particular variety of religious experience, in my mind's eye, I was not in the car with my father; I floated elsewhere, the solution a mixture of silence and shadow. In retrospect, there were signs, this escapism was symptomatic, but back then it was all new. And like any other kid, I saw my father become more and more entranced by his mistress, Mary J. I looked away from him, and out the window, saw the leaves shake in the trees, heard the sound of another boy drag an aluminum bat along the concrete sidewalk, felt the cool snicker of the leather seat against my hand—but the sensations only sank into that place that was no place, that room inside where there was no sound, no melody of the familiar.

My father and his friend babbled on, but I heard only the long silence between their banter. Outside the car window I heard a greater symphony: the scrape of wind against my temples, the blood pounding in the shell of my ear.

I had fallen off the mound. When I reached up to scratch my head, it was bleeding.

4.

Stud

I fell in love with books when I was eight, about the time the Los Angeles Dodgers lost to the Yankees again, about the time *Star Wars* made androids and space travel a tangible vision, about the moment when the efflorescence of Flower Power and the *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests* and my parents generation's obsession with altered states of mind seemed to fully wilt, droop, and die. My father and mother distributed magazines in Central London during the early 70's, and five years later, having sold their distributorship, and left their three-year old yellow lab with a millionaire in Kent, moved my brother and my mother's dying great-aunt back to what we, fashionably, call the 'Homeland', these United States, with many things, though all that finally mattered for my education was one of two brown boxes.

The lesser box, the one with yellowing copies of *Time Out* and newsprint *Rolling Stones* and *The Anarchist* and the *Berkeley Free Press*, I completely ignored. However, the second brown box—a box that always competed in my memory with another family dog, this one adopted into our household on the return from the U.K., this other retriever, Billie—was stored (though I am hesitant to in any way make passive this powerful object) in the garage behind our house in Tarzana.

One day in the Spring, a forgotten impulse led me, alone, out the sliding back door and across the red brick patio, past my mother's flowering red and

purple pansies fluttering their sepal parasols above the dark topsoil. I remember the shadow of the old walnut tree, its gnarled black and grey branches rising out of a square punched into the brick, reaching out towards the sky. The branches and green leaves and occasional nut—covered in its hard, green suit—cast a cool shade in the midst of suburban Los Angeles swelter. My folks argued often. The previous night, my father called my mother a *fat, lazy bitch*, and my mother poured a bottle of red wine over his head. He jumped up and threw her against the doorframe joining the dining room and the kitchen. Dotty, my aunt, didn't even look up, being deaf, and continued picking at the broccoli and baked chicken. Billie barked and nipped at my father's heels. And, though I don't remember what I did, the image of my parents—their mouths wild in complaint, my father's hairy hands around my mother's pink neck, their eyes strained into a combination beyond all reason, the music of no space—bothered me. Which is why that box in the garage seemed such a consolation. And I must have felt an unfamiliar, yet irresistible leap in my heart when I saw through the gloom of the garage, pulled back the cardboard top, and found those three dozen books. Their titles, though now empty of all nostalgia, illuminated my sad, eight-year old mind with what must have been the lightning strike of taboo: *Abducted Virgin. Cherry. The Gang Bang. Chocolate Heaven. Stud.*

Perhaps other kids take their first plunge into the pleasure of books with *Great Expectations* or *Black Beauty* or even, as my brother did, *The Hobbit*. Perhaps I came to the novel through pornography for reasons I don't understand yet. A great deal of chaos is still unexplained. And as a preadolescent, I read and re-

read these books, captivated by the elements that mark any good yarn: conflict, character, and reward. I would seclude myself in the narrow bathroom at the end of the hall, the gold and green wallpaper shining under the fluorescent bulb, and leaned up against the thin, wooden door, devouring page after concupiscent page. Like any good genre fiction, as I was later to learn, books like *Cherry* had a formula, yes, that played itself out over two-hundred-and-fifty pages. My favorite, *Stud*, featured an eighteen-year old named Steve, who, equipped by the author with a heroic apparatus, managed to enter the world of adult sexuality in one fast day and, before midnight, find himself simultaneously the sweet lozenge of seven phallomaniacs, including his mother and sister. (Porno is nothing if not realistic.)

Perhaps there was something about Steve's easy swagger, his verbal nonchalance, that moved me to reread *Stud* even more than the other books from that boxed library.

A few years later, I would begin my first sexual relationship, slathering my apprentice apparatus with peanut butter and jelly and shamelessly encouraging poor Billie to do what she instinctively would do without a tremor of bashfulness, though I wouldn't know much about shame yet either.

5.

Good Night, Dotty

That year around the holidays, my great-aunt fell ill with congestive heart failure. My folks were now separated, and I found myself at Dotty's bedside with my mother. Dotty moaned and clutched her chest and her head. She wouldn't say where it hurt, so the doctors could only offer her aspirin. My mother would shout, "Dotty, does your chest hurt?" And Dotty would kiss her teeth, moan, and close her eyes. My mother would shout, "Oh! She's so ungrateful. She's never going to thank me for all I've done for her. Do you know how long I've put up with this?" I said nothing. My mother clenched her lips and sighed. But she would not sit still, rearranging the potted poinsettia she'd purchased in the gift store, pulling the curtain another few inches around the track (Dotty shared the room with two other elderly women). Saying, "My best friend is a Professor of Nursing. I know this hospital could pay their nurses better, that they're disgruntled. Poor things." Finally, my mother went to the office.

I sat next to Dotty and held her bony hand. Her veins were pale green through the clay wrinkle of her skin. As I stroked her silky, white hair off her forehead, she muttered in her half-sleep. The doctor came in just after dark, and she told him her chest hurt. When he asked how much, she said "like hell." He gave her a morphine drip, and she became less agitated.

I didn't want to leave her, so I sat at her side, holding her hand. At some point, my mother returned, and we played three-way solitaire. Dotty couldn't

see the cards. Would put the Six of Clubs on top of the Queen of Spades. We played anyway, my mother asking, "What is wrong with this family?"

I shrugged.

"Have you ever watched someone die?" she asked.

I shook my head. Her voice and her subject matter embarrassed me. She had no tact. And no volume control, either. Every sentence came out of her voice box like a Louis Armstrong solo.

"I sat for two days at the hospital with your grandfather. You know he had a heart attack. Comatose four days before he passed. I sat at his bedside. Read *The Tempest* to him, his favorite. Now he's in the Pacific, his ashes. *Of coral made that were his eyes.*"

My mother fell asleep at ten.

As the morphine took effect, Dotty became more and more disoriented. "Go into the hallway and get some sheets and go to bed," she said.

"No," I whispered.

She told me to go to bed again, but I shook my head, leaning into her good ear and saying, "I don't want to leave you, Auntie."

She sucked her teeth and shook her head. "It's not good manners," she told me. "Go on. Go to bed."

I stroked her cheek, and she raised her bony hand to her face.

"I want to go home," she said.

A phone rang beside the bed of the other sick woman sharing the room.

"Someone's in my house," Dotty said. She clutched her chest. She hacked,

and I brought a piece of tissue paper to her lips. My mother slept all the while in the chair to the left of the bed, a copy of *Portnoy's Complaint* like a tent over her nose and mouth. I gave Dotty tissues for the next ten minutes, taking the soiled ones and dumping them into a plastic bedpan. She groaned, and said, "Oh, this is a miserable existence." She brought her hand up to her face again and almost cried. Then she turned and looked at me sternly, her face a hollow mask, her skin a pale shade of gray. "When I get back on my feet," she said, "we'll go to the zoo together. Just the two of us."

I nodded and held her hand, feeling the pulse of her heart, still beating in a faint but steady rhythm.

"Go to bed," she told me, again. "Go to bed in the other room. You need some sleep, and I need to sleep too."

Reluctantly, I walked away. I would go down to the cafeteria and buy a soda, I thought. Then come back and watch over her. I turned at the doorway. Her head had fallen to one side, her mouth hung open, and her chest rose and fell in a barely perceptible alternation.

After the funeral we—my mother, father, brother, my mother's mother, and my dad's parents—went to Merv's Delicatessen on Ventura Boulevard.

While my father seemed to agonize over every word, my grandfather William was a much more confident raconteur, holding forth on topics from imaginary numbers to Zionism.

"Oh, Dotty will be missed," he bellowed. Hard of hearing, when he spoke in a group, his voice was even louder than my mother's.

My maternal grandmother, Elly, had a flinty personality. Though both had come of age during the Depression, perhaps Grandpa Bill had seen more of the world. A navigator on Flying Fortresses during World War II, shot down a few miles on the Allied side of the French countryside. Fortunately, they were both hard of hearing.

"Oh, I wish he'd shut up," Elly sighed.

"—And I remember how Dotty rose to speak, valedictorian of her class—"

"What did he say?" Elly cried.

"She spoke. Dotty spoke," said Granma Deborah.

"Why is Grandpa yelling?" I asked Deborah, reaching for a pickle.

"'Y' is a crooked letter," Elly told me, slapping my hand away from the pickles. "You'll get fat if you eat when you're not hungry."

"Your Grandma Elly is hard of hearing, dear," Granma Deborah told me.

At this Elly clicked her tongue.

My mother sat next to me and lowered her chin, her eyes watery. I handed her a napkin, and she dabbed her eyes while looking at my father. "Isaac," she said, "I guess Dotty really brought out the best in people."

"She would have made a great scientist, Sarah," Bill said, tapping the side of the water glass. "I would like to make a toast—"

The edge of my mother's green blouse had folded awkwardly against her wrist, and she had dropped it into the lox and cheese on the plate in front of her. My father looked around and snapped his fingers at a waiter, who ignored him. My mother stared at my father through half-closed eyes, her lower lip trembling, then lowered her face and seemed to shake some deep pain into the air. Then she cried, 'Oh I gave everything to help—" She couldn't finish her sentence and began sobbing. My father got up from his seat and came around the table to hold her against his chest as her shoulders heaved.

"Oh, I don't see what all the fuss is about," Elly said to no one in particular. "When you get old, you just don't want to bother. I'm tired." She tapped my brother on the arm and then reached her long, bony hand out towards me, waving her finger. There was a large, turquoise ring on it, and it seemed to hold some secret in its hard jelly of rock. "Isaac, my sister was a handful," she said, half-smiling. "It's better this way." She quickly looked to one side, sighing. Then she turned and asked, "You're not depressed are you?"

I didn't know what she meant and reached for another pickle.

She kissed her teeth and sighed again, saying, "Oh, this family is for the birds."

Later that night, my father stoned, my mother asleep on the floor, a glass of red wine turned over on her chest, the maroon stain spreading from her neck

to her ribs, I crept into the garage, found *Stud*, and went into the bathroom. That night, I rubbed and read until it bled.

6.

Chapter Drive: Inside, An Inferno

My parents patched things up. My dad got a better job and we moved to a bigger house, further into the West San Fernando Valley where it seemed like there was always more.

Suburban Chapter Drive dead-ended in the oak and chaparral hills that rose and fell in gold and green and brown brushstrokes for ten miles westward until the land met the deeper blues and emerald greens of the Pacific Ocean. On Chapter, however, the human system only seemed to rise, with the best the American dollar could buy. The coyotes came down from the hills at night when the trashcans sat out for pickup, and if you were to pick through the wide green and blue plastic coffers, you would find much to indulge in. Oh, when will I face it? Our parents sold what they could: bullshit and backslapping, triple-looped throw rugs from Kabul and huge surgical shipments of rhinoplasty kits and silicone implants, tax shelters and loopholes and 30-year municipal bonds to boozing celebrities/neighbors overdosing on snort and red-haired sinsemilla, stuffing the backs of their Hockney lithographs with bags of California Cornflakes, stocking their filigreed wooden boxes with smelly pounds of Humboldt County *Cannabis sativa*, plastering their homes with textured wallpaper and brick barbecues, tile lined pools and bricked patios, Jaguars and Beemers in the garage, peach and persimmon trees in year round bloom. An assembly line obbligato of

American Dreams laid out like tight round cookies on a steel sheet, just a Southern California brushfire away from incineration.

And it was for their children to crawl out from their coigns of vantage after curfew and smoke weed in the dirt at the end of the road while the coyotes howled off-key at the sickle moon.

My family lived about halfway up Chapter Drive, and I remember how shy I was when we first arrived. I only felt comfortable walking Billie into the mountains, alone, the oak-scented air and the swaying of gold-stained grain against the breeze friction, an electricity humming with the intensity of silence. Stopping now and then to rub my fingers against the furry leaves of purple sage; my eyes roaming across the abandoned cars and remnant scaffolding from television shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, trash left-behind in what was once Warner Brothers' backlot.

One day, some kids from the street knocked at the door and invited me out to play.

I learned that every house on the long serpentine block contained a teenage inhabitant, and I soon grew comfortable congregating under the streetlamps, trading in the jangle of adolescent male bravado. We spoke a modified King's English full of the excited phraseology of jejune suburbia, of inarticulate hearts fishing for connection in the idiom seemingly conceived in the cocktail of trust funds, angel turds and the pop lyrics of hippie offspring (q.v. Frank Zappa's Moonunit). On Chapter Drive, in the San Fernando Valley, circa 1984, we maintained our coolness by declaiming life was endlessly *awesome!* And *no way!* And

dude!! Each expression enunciated with such exclamatory power and nuanced intonation it was as if the words, like plastic buoys, floated on the surface of a deep ocean, the syllables reaching down to some submerged place where crabs and jelly fish and rotting dhows, their pirate flags fluttering ragged in the deep current, sat in cold darkness, indifferent to discovery.

Along the S-shaped road, the macadam pressed to black perfection, the houses shaped like cut confectionary, each lawn mowed with Freudian precision, the bougainvillea and yucca trimmed with all the passion immigrant labor could buy, I sensed the older silence gradually diminish, and I heard a new movement grow in the fife and drum of friendship.

But, enough of all these fine descriptions!

Finally, I am left with the memory of my own yearning. Of playing street games of nerf football; of wrestling Egghead Craig, Hoop, Shane, and Greg in warm pools while the heat bore down on our milk-white skin.

Hoop built what we all called the *side hack*: a bike with an attached metal platform and a third wheel. Often, we piled nine or ten of us on, one of us peddling like mad, the rest hanging over the rubberized handle bar of the side hack. Crashing badly whenever the pedaler turned left, the cumulative weight of ten teenage boys and girls flipping the bike on its side, throwing everyone into a giggling pile, my bloodied shins and elbows insignificant amidst the glee of shared failure.

I would do quite a lot to belong.

7.

Blackout

Alcohol is the most popular antidote for anxiety in two hundred and thirty six of the world's two hundred and forty three countries.

My first blackout drunk occurred at thirteen. As good an age as any to experience blinding intoxication, to leave behind the crowding anxieties of achievement that trickled down from our high achieving, managerial parents like so much surplus capital. Things, things, things were everywhere and perhaps the urge to throw off the expectations of consumption motivated me to drink that night. Whatever the precise reason—perhaps no more precise than the imperceptible clang of the world going about its business, inexpressible—a few of the Chapter Drive gang assembled at Mrs. Butterworth's house. She was a theatrical agent of sorts, and her son, Shane, was a childhood movie star who played Little Timmy, the runny-nose third baseman in *The Bad News Bears*. Mrs. Butterworth wined and dined Hollywood producers in her jeweled house, and she had a fully-stocked mahogany bar built into one corner of her living room. The bar split the room diagonally, the Southwestern pastel tiles arranged abstractly along the counter top, cold to the touch. I remember pouring Dewar's and Remy-Marin and Meyer's and some hundred-year old Scotch whisky into a thick blue-glass goblet. Unfortunately, the last thing I remember is walking up Chapter Drive with Egghead, Greg, and Greg's huge football-player friend, Jerome.

The next morning I woke naked in my bed. I put some shorts on and went to shoot hoops at the basket affixed above Mr. and Mrs. Bentley's garage door.

A little while later, Greg appeared saying, "Isaac, what in the hell are you doin'?"

"Shootin'," I said, confused as to why he considered this odd. We played basketball nearly every day, even in the rare rainstorm.

"Dude! No way! You don't know what happened last night?"

"No. Why?" I said, tossing him the ball.

He caught it, and hugged it against his chest, saying, "Dude! You were beyond drunk! You were unconscious! You called Jerome a 'nigger' to his face! Dude! He's six foot six inches, two hundred forty pounds! Then you puked everywhere! And I mean *everywhere*. It was awesome!!"

"How did I get home?"

"We carried you in."

"Didn't my parents wake up?"

My parents, I would later learn, did wake up, but went back to bed.

8.

Meditation on Integration

One day, when I came home, hot and sweaty from playing with the gang, my father beckoned me over to the rosewood entertainment center and said, "Isaac, I want you to hear something."

"But Dad! We're gonna' go dig for Shoshone treasure at the end of the street."

My father raised his eyebrows; it was his favorite semaphore, a sign for all sorts of emotions—surprise, disdain, worry, mockery—each one accompanied by a slightly different height and angle of brow. To be precise, he didn't really have eyebrows, plural. It was more like one long unibrow that reminded me of the Swedish chef from Sesame Street. "Ingen furgen lupen, ya!" he said. I started to laugh, but he just raised his eyebrow a little further and said, "Ingen, Isaac. Ingen."

We stood over the old record player, and the scratch-and-pop of vinyl-grooves gave way to music.

I heard a bass line thumping a four-note phrase, and, then, a bass clarinet mirroring those notes. Then I heard a short drum roll and the scratch of brushes on a snare. The bass clarinet phrase grew louder, stronger. The bass then dropping the plucked phrase, beginning to trace a haunting melody with bow, soaring fragile and proud, reaching a crescendo, drenching the rosewood space with emotion, until suddenly, the music stopped. The whole band stopped, and in the

silence, I could hear my father breathing, the breath rattling in his throat. Then, suddenly, the band broke into a torrent of sound that scraped the low end of the scale and washed way up to the highest audible register, the melody dancing in the air like spray thrown from the top of a forest waterfall, the music raining down on my ears and sinking its notes in the deepest layers of my psyche.

When the song ended, I whispered to my father, "What was that?"

"That was Charles Mingus's "Meditation on Integration."

"Integration? Like black and white people living together?"

"Maybe."

But there wasn't really any ambiguity. Though my father listened to lots of music created by African-Americans, the idea of integration hovered in the air without ever touching down. Aside from Egghead, who claimed French-Spanish heritage, but was teased for being "Mexican" because his mom listened to Julio Inglesias, the sole indication of neighborhood diversity was the distinction between the secular Jewish majority and the secular Christian minority. The slur that slipped from my mouth during the blackout wasn't common. The Aryan Brotherhood didn't appear active in this part of the Valley, though echoes of a major presence in Canoga Park and Reseda rumbled through the rumor-mongering halls of Taft High. Still, when you're surrounded by a culture that glorifies people like yourself, and demonizes others, it's no wonder I dropped the N-bomb in the middle of a blackout. Or that Jerome never returned to Chapter Drive.

I began to play the trumpet, my father renting a brass, student-model Bundy that I holed up with in my bedroom, playing scales and etudes and bop charts until I practiced fingering and melodies without the horn, popping Billie Holiday tapes into my boombox and jamming along with her hard honey voice until Egg and the rest came banging on my window to pull me out of my musical solitude.

9.

A Demonstration

Though I was wedded to Chapter Drive fun, my younger brother, Alex, was more sensitive to our parent's largely dormant political vibrations. In junior high he helped start a youth group called Bridges. They began protesting against apartheid, and even recruited a former African National Congress member, Xhosa Kunene, to teach chants from the Soweto uprisings. Alex enlisted me for occasional car rides, and I remember attending one of the pre-march sessions. There was a particular way to march against South African racism. A slow, but steady jog. A closed, upraised fist. Xhosa would shout, "Amandla!" And we would shout in reply, "Soweto!"

One weekend afternoon, intrigued by the chanting my brother told me about, I followed him into the city where dozens gathered in front of the South African Consulate in Beverly Hills and shouted and shook signs and generally made things unpleasant for the California outpost of P. W. Botha's government. It was a mixed crowd and as I sat on the sidelines, observing the marchers, I saw for the first time the woman who would change my life.

"Excuse me," I said, "Are you here for the protest?"

"Yeah. Aren't you?"

"No, I'm Botha's grandson. I'm just observing for the old fart."

She seemed to freeze, crossing her arms over her chest, her eyelids beating, her eyes narrowing before she slowly replied, "You must be joking?"

I shrugged, my palms outstretched, my lips curved in mock resignation. "Can you choose your parents?"

She turned to walk away, but I took her arm in my hand and cried, "I'm kidding, I'm kidding!"

She stopped and said, "Well, it wasn't much of a joke."

"I know."

She looked at my hand on her arm, and then she looked at me—really looked—for the first time.

Her eyes were brown, quite different from her complexion, which seemed to span the whole continuum of the pigment formed from the combination of red and yellow and black.

She looked at where I held her arm again, and I suddenly came to my senses. I felt like I had been rehearsing this meeting for a long time. The confidence that was never there was suddenly palpable, my chest rising, and I responded to her candid stare by saying, "Do you really want your arm back?"

"Maybe," she casually replied.

I seemed to lose myself again in the elegant triangle of her face and nose and lips. Her cheeks were slightly raised below her eyes, the smooth curve approximating the elegance of another Cover Girl. Still, she was no porcelain doll. There was a scar above the bridge of her nose. Her two front teeth were ever so slightly misaligned. And she had an irresistible overbite.

"My arm?" she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

Tongue-tied, I let her go.

She pushed a braid behind her ear and asked, "How old are you, Botha, Jr.?"

Suddenly nervous, I looked around and saw the marchers reflected in the opaque windows of the consulate building. I smelled the rich aroma of garlic wafting over from the Fragrant Vegetable restaurant across Doheny. When I found the words, I tried misdirection, saying, "Very old,"

"And what's your real name?"

"Isaac. I think my parents named me after the singer."

"Isaac Hayes?" she asked, twisting her lip in disbelief, her voice raised in mockery. "Are you sure? You look more like the guy from the Old Testament story."

"Who?"

She shook her head and chuckled, "Well, I'm Naima. I think I know your brother."

She offered me her hand, and I embraced it. Then I turned it over and pretended to read her palm. I looked closer and saw that her palm was pink like mine. The only difference was her deep grooves—her lifeline, her loveline—were purple, while mine were a fading red. I grimaced in the glare coming off the opaque glass of the Consulate building, and said, "I had no idea how beautiful a black girl could be."

She turned her face, suddenly a mixture of shyness and pique, and said, "Who are you, Isaac Hayes?"

I could see our reflection in the window. I stood next to her, at least a half-foot taller, and our bodies took on the melted twist the sun sometimes obtains as it sets over the ocean. All the surface details were obscured. Even the physical outlines, the shapes a homicide detective might use to chalk our fallen bodies, became distorted in the shadowplay of the Consulate window. When I turned to the left to avoid the glare, my reflection seemed to sweep into Naima's for a moment. "Would you go out with me?" I suddenly asked, nothing to lose.

She seemed to consider the offer, and I drew her hand closer. But just at that moment, sirens fractured the sweet tension growing between us. Three police cars, headlights flashing, sirens spinning red and blue, surged out of the Beverly Hills traffic. Instructions bellowed through a loudspeaker mounted on the roof of one of the patrol cars.

Naima tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Well, I better go. You gonna' tell your granpops to ease up on the black folks?"

"I'll see what I can do."

And she was gone, off into the crowd. I watched her as she bounced away, my eyes capturing her fading image and holding it.

10.

I Followed the Footprints of My Tribal Peers

Naima lived downtown, near MacArthur Park, while I lived nearly twenty-five miles away. I moved in the outer circles of Los Angeles, where sixteen year olds drove BMWs, while Naima lived in the inner-city where I could only imagine, given the nuance of tv news, that if any teenagers actually drove a car, it was to drive into enemy territory and fire a Gatling gun at someone as part of some bloody rite of passage. Suburban assumptions. Like some prehistoric ape, when I saw black students at school or on the rare occasion when I went to Dodger Stadium or the Natural History Museum at USC and came face to face with black people, I was scared. And I sensed the same fear in my friends and their parents, in my own parents as well, with explicit and, more often, implicit regularity. I mean, the only reason I knew "gat" was an abbreviation for a Gatling gun was because I checked my parents' *Encyclopedia Britannica* for the entry: "a machine gun issuing with multiple barrels revolving around a central axis." Even though most adults on Chapter Drive prided themselves on being open-minded liberals, even though I myself began, through Bridges, to make friends with people of color, my own racism—unconscious, as so much of it is today—was something I became aware of slowly and with great pain. Plus, it was way too early to start being sensible about choosing a romantic companion. I wanted what I thought all young men needed to really test their manhood. I wanted sex. Easy sex. And I forgot about Naima, and did what I imagined

every suburban man-boy did when they came upon the tracks of desire. I followed the footprints of my tribal peers; I went to the Topanga Canyon Mall with Egghead Craig.

In retrospect, something good in me deplores that I found first love in this spot of all spots, this *axis mundi* of American culture, this replica of a replica, but it's true. Lodged somewhere between the topography of synthetic stucco, luxury cars and the ever present Hot-Dog-On-A-Stick, as the Southern California sun turned the macadam to mush, I prayed that someone, anyone amongst the brood of divorce lawyers and manqué scriptwriters would offer the slip of female companionship, and Shirley arose out of the wash of West Valley like a mirage.

It was '86. The summer heat swept through Southern California like a dry rag, leaving a coat of irritation on everyone and everything, though when you're young the heat doesn't bother you as much, and pilgrims such as Egghead Craig and I visited the malls dotting the Valley like religious shrines with cool piety. We called him Egghead because, though everyone on Chapter Drive knew he wasn't haha funny, he could even be a bit tiresome, still, he worked so very hard at cracking people up. As we walked through the deserted mall parking lot, Egghead whined, "Look at all these suckas."

In '86, Run DMC's "Walk This Way" brought rap to the suburbs, and over the next few years Egghead began memorizing the band's lyrics, reciting them over and over each day, each recitation burning ever deeper into what served as his identity. When we arrived at the mall's stucco portico, Egghead swaggering

with all the self-reverence he imagined was part of rap's ethos, he punched me in the shoulder and sang, "Yo, Yo. You should know where I'm coming from but you're just dumb, ditty dumb, ditty ditty, dumb dumb."

He wore red sweat pants, red shirt, red hat, red wristband, white sneakers, and firehose-fat red, white, and blue laces. He was, in fact, a conical beet, a sartorial homage to his heroes, the notorious Los Angeles street gang, the Bloods, and as we circled the indoor promenade looking for action, I felt a certain amount of pride in Egg's pose, even though I knew he lived in a five-hundred thousand dollar house on Chapter Drive. His pants sagging just below the juncture where his legs converged at his groin, his red boxer shorts exposed for all the world to see, I myself—clad in less flamboyant, but equally de rigueur parachute pants— imagined a certain amount of fellowship with the spirit of urban toughness. So we stalked the mall, looking for action and, having no success, finally headed back into the parking lot to break dance and talk shit. Not just about the punk wearing the obviously outré forest green Polo shirt. Or the middle-aged man whose aft-leaning brandy-colored hairpiece seemed on the verge of assuming a new location on his thick-haired back. No, we were going to talk shit about anyone who happened to walk by.

Unfortunately, the parking lot was empty.

So as the temperature rose above a hundred degrees, we argued over the appearance of a serial killer. The news reports were calling him "the Suburban Strangler," and he had left a dozen mutilated bodies across the Southland from Reseda to Riverside.

"The Strangler can kiss my ass," Egghead said.

"If you had an ass," I replied. "Dude, he wouldn't bother with you anyway. He only eviscerates old people."

"Que dice?" Egghead's speech alternated between East L.A. slang and the local idiom largely distinguished by its mantric interjections. "No way, esse," he said. "You're, like, just afraid of the Strangler."

At sixteen, my own language straddled the fence between the fustian phrases I read in my parents' library and the dominant mode of expression. "Man, like, forget the Strangler," I said. "He can go ad hominem on everyone in the Valley for all I care. Look around you, Egg, this place sucks."

"Ad what?"

"Nevermind."

He scoffed, and looked out over the rows of cars, just then surveying that realm of parking lot gold. Egg was content, and he seemed to breathe in the sweet smell of gas and motor oil like it was ambrosia. "Look esse, this mall is awesome! Man! Why are you always so negative?" He let flow his only smooth move, a trademark poplock technique, the one that moved each joint in successive motion from the fingertips of his right hand, through his palm and forearm, biceps, shoulders, down the other arm, each carpal and metacarpal taking its turn in the ritual, until it ended with his middle finger wagging three inches from my nose. Following this he said, "Let's battle!"

Egghead flipped on his silver and black boombox, and tuned in the underground rap station, KDAY. The beats poured out of the speakers and as I

jerked my head back and forth to the music, Egghead laid out two brown boxes. Despite my suspect dancing abilities, I rubbed my hands together and knelt to tighten my laces.

But we were interrupted by another sort of knot, when out of nowhere, three young native women walked past, zebra-striped purses swinging, feathered blonde hair flipping in the breeze, Quiet Riot! Tee-shirts cut just above their flat stomachs into jagged arrowhead shapes, exclamation point tattoos hovering over their naked bellybuttons like some profound grammatical non sequitur.

Egghead shoved me towards them, saying "Hey esse, there go some hotties! Go after them, holmes! Hurry!"

They were in the right age group, maybe even a little younger and potentially more vulnerable to my sixteen-year old sass. And so, being a suburban, third-generation, assimilated East European Jew just recently weaned from a steady diet of X-Minus-One and Phillip K. Dick, I jumped up and said, "Step aside, Egghead. This is a job for Captain Intergalactic."

The three girls had stopped and gathered for some sort of virginal powwow outside the mall entrance, their impassioned colloquy a little intimidating.

Got to be smooth, I thought as I tiptoed closer. Finally, I took a deep breath, tapped the short one on the shoulder and, with all the wit I could muster up, said, "Uh ... uh ... uh, excuse me. Is your dad a thief?"

She gave me the Evil Eye and asked, "Why?"

"Because someone stole all the stars and put them in your eyes."

If I thought upon hearing such a corny line that she would disrobe in the parking lot and paste her mouth on my lips, I was sorely mistaken. For all she did was swivel her head—the response something like the motions of an ancient, tired meatpacking machine—back toward her friends. And then they all laughed until I thought my bones would grind to dust.

But hope springs from an eternal source.

Captain Intergalactic would not be repulsed. I activated my Superhuman Powers and tapped her on the shoulder again. I had it all planned. I would plant a kiss right on her lovely lips, right smack in the middle of her sweet face. She turned. I took one step towards her, and tripped over my untied shoelaces, landing flat on my face. When I sat up, blood shot out of my nose.

It was a stunning blow.

My Intended tiptoed over and exclaimed, "Oh. My. God. I think he's, like, dead!"

I pinched the bridge and sopped up the viscous blood with my t-shirt. I could hear Egghead laughing his ass off.

"Wow. You fell really hard. I thought you were, like, dead."

"Oh, no, no, no. I'm, like, alive. Really."

She giggled, and though my nerves were ragged, with the blood dripping into my mouth, I shook off my doubts, and asked the most pressing question of adolescent life, "Can I, like, have your number?"

Now this is a question that many have asked or been asked. On reflection, the better part of me wonders why people ask just the one question and not the

many that could follow like: "Will you still love me after the six hundred and forty-second argument about who left the cap off the toothpaste? Who cares who left the frickin' cap off? Geez, it's just a damn cap! Is it really ripping a hole in the fabric of society? What are you saying: that it's indicative of my general inability to respect your needs and maintain a deep, consistent level of emotional intimacy? My god, it's just the cap! Why did you even marry me in the first place? You knew I was a slob ten years ago!"

Strangely enough, these questions didn't arise in the parking lot that afternoon.

But Shirley did give me her number. Which just goes to show that something good can come out of a nosebleed. I called later that day.

"Hi, it's Captain Intergalactic."

"Hey, Cap'n."

"You wanna' see my spaceship?"

"Sure. Come over."

"What are your coordinates?

"My accordions?"

"Negative, Private. Your coordinates. Longitude and latitude."

"I don't know that stuff, Cap'n. Maybe you should just take the bus."

"The bus. Very interesting. Okay, earthling. What is your present dwelling place?"

"Are you askin' me where I live?"

"Affirmative."

She giggled. A short, scraping titter that ended on a note just out of earshot. I heard Shirley yelling through the phone, saying, "Mom. What's our address?"

An adult voice shouted, "Shirley, get off that damn phone!"

"I gotta go, Isaac."

"Don't you know what address, what street you live on?" I asked, exasperated.

"No-oooh!"

"Aww. Why don't you go outside and look at your mailbox?"

11.

Was There Anything More To Love?

The next day, I cut school and headed towards Reseda on bus number five. Her house was on a cul-de-sac full of tall, shady sycamores. I walked up the steps, rang the bell, and Shirley cracked the door open, hiding half her face behind the chipped, brown edges of its thin, wooden frame.

She said, "Boo!"

"Boo-boo?"

"Si, senor. Boo."

"Caspar, your ghost Spanish is very interesting. Would you please let me in?"

She opened the door, and she was transformed. She had dyed her hair red, she had scrubbed off her exclamation-point tattoo, and she had painted her sweet oval lips with gloss.

Since this occasion was something like our first date, since we didn't know anything about each other, and since we were young and full of life, we went into her bedroom.

"What's up with you today?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Where's your Mom and Dad?"

"My Dad doesn't live with us. My Mom's at work."

There was nothing else to do but kiss. And undress. Shirt, shorts, pants, shoes, socks. They all went flying off into the corner. The next thing I knew we were naked, and we were trying to do *it*! But I didn't know what *it* was! The whole operation was doomed to failure. But oh that romantic chasm! *Weave a circle round him thrice*. Somehow, the time came for intercourse. Just as Shirley began to guide me in, the sound of her mom's car crunching the gravel in the driveway threw us into an abrupt panic, and I scrambled for my clothes.

Shirley took my hand and hustled me out of her room into another bedroom, where she hid me in the closet. In horror, I tried making myself small. Sweat pooled in my armpits. It spread bead-like over my forehead. Then I realized it was Shirley's mother's closet.

The closet was filled with shoes, a rack of skirts, necklaces, hats, blouses, pants, and assorted accessorizing effluvia. It was dark except for two shafts of light that shot through the slats of the white folding doors. There was a stack of magazines in one corner and a black box in the other. I reached towards the black box, and it fell open to reveal a shotgun. I jumped back, my heart pounding away as never before. Then I crouched down to inspect the weapon. It was long, double-barreled, and had an inscription I could just make out in the gloom. It read: "White Power."

Suddenly, her mother was in the bedroom. I smacked my hand over my mouth and held my breath. As I looked through the slats in the closet, I could see the family resemblance. She was still young, maybe 30, and pretty. But she looked tired, harassed by any number of afflictions. She puffed on a cigarette

and couldn't seem to keep her long brown hair out of her eyes. She took a final hit off her smoke, balanced it on the nightstand next to her bed, and removed her shirt. Her adult breasts hung in my face like two gigantic Anjou pears. Her musty odor wafted into my nostrils and I stymied the urge to cough. Then she reached inside, her hand narrowly missing my crotch. She grabbed a yellow blouse, plucked her ashy cigarette up, crammed it back into her mouth, and left the room.

I sighed and was about to relax, when the bedroom door opened again.

"Isaac, where are you?" Shirley asked.

"I'm in the closet. Where you stuck me," I said, irritated. "Is your Mom still around?"

"Yeah. Let me introduce her to you. Come out."

That was the last straw. She was an idiot as far as I was concerned, and I said, "Why didn't you just introduce me in the first place?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, like, I don't know."

She helped me out, and we went into the kitchen where her Mom was rifling through her purse.

"Honey, have you seen my lighter?" She was agitated. Like a drugged beast, her eyelids heavy, she seemed of another world.

Shirley clasped her hands together, twisted her neck in an effort to look cute, and said, "Mom, I want you to meet my friend, Isaac." She presented me to her mom with a flourish, hands outstretched, framing me as if I were some sort of game-show prize.

Her mom gave me the once-over, made a half-hearted smile, and went back to her hunt. "Ah, here it is." Having found her treasured Zippo, she grabbed her purse, kissed Shirley on the forehead, and said "I gotta' run, sweetie. My lunch hour is 'bout over."

"Bye, Mom," Shirley droned. The door slammed shut, and we heard the car start up with a rattle, pull out of the driveway, and speed away.

We went back into Shirley's bedroom. While she lay on the bed, I sat on the peeling white paint of the window ledge and wondered what could happen next.

"That was a close one," I sighed.

Shirley scoffed and said, "Not even. My mom wouldn't, like, even have noticed even if we hadn't, like, stopped messing around. She wouldn't have checked my room." Her jaw hung slack and her upper teeth hovered over her lower lip.

I was exasperated. "Look earthling. What is your major malfunction? Why the heck did you hide me in your mom's closet? Are you trying to touch off an intergalactic conflict?"

"No," she replied, straightening her back, and curling a strand of her bright red hair with her finger as she bit her lip.

"Well, why then?"

She just gave me an impish grin and said, "Like, to scare you, silly."

I stood up to leave, but she put her hands on my chest, and pushed me back into a seated position.

Then she sucked once on her glossy lips and said, "Let me see if I can, like, make it up to you." And with that, she gave me the kind of attention that makes some men wonder well into their adult years if there is anything more to love.

12.

Kings and Queens Now Strikingly Two-Dimensional

When I got back home later that afternoon, Egg was at my door sipping on a can of Hawaiian Punch.

"Well, vato. Did you get some?" He was wearing a green Polo shirt, khaki shorts and brown boat shoes. His mother still exercised some control over her child's dress code: the conical beat outfit was de facto for the mall, but whenever he was within shouting distance of his mother, Egg suffered under the de jure rule of his mother. "Well, c'mon pussy," Egg said, "Like, tell me la verdad!"

I could see my own mother inside the house preparing food in the kitchen. Her presence and the shock of my experience made me reluctant to share the details with Egg at that very moment. So I stalled.

"I gotta' go, Egg. I'll meet up with you in a few hours."

"Ah, c'mon you fuckin' punk!" He stood up and threw a punch towards my face, stopping his fist right before it hit my nose. I flinched a little and Egg-head shook his head, saying, "Okay, okay. Like, you can't even tell your fuckin' homie about some loving he helped you get. I bet your little dick didn't even get wet, holmes. Anyway, you better, like, come by my crib later tonight and tell me what happened."

He turned and swaggered out of our walled patio, past the flowering pansies, past the preening hollyhocks, past the marble fountain of Cupid shooting

water into the hot air, and into our block of suburban paradise, his shoulders swinging, shorts sagging just below his butt cheeks.

I shook my head at Egghead's unbelievable act, turned, and walked through the double-doors of home. My father was in the living room, hunched over the rosewood entertainment center, fiddling with the stereo.

"Hey, son. Look what I found for you." He was rewinding a tape. An empty case sat on the counter top. It read: "Orson Welles's Campbell Soup Theater Presents *Jane Eyre*. Originally recorded on September 1st 1939."

Over the preceding years, my father had developed an insatiable desire for old radio shows. He scoured the want ads and the garage sales of decrepit octogenarians in hopes of finding rare copies of *X-Minus-One* and *Suspense!* A steady diet of such fare provided me with a peculiar cultural education. The refrain from shows like *The Shadow*—with its haunting introductory lines: "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."—represented a substantial share of my induction into the ways of the world.

When my father looked up and saw my bruised nose, finally noticing my little injury from the fall at the mall, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Ouch, Isaac. What happened?"

I told him Craig and I helped the mall police catch a shoplifter.

"Really? That's terrific!" But I could see he wasn't convinced. He changed the subject. "Well, maybe we can listen to *Jane Eyre* after dinner?"

But I had other plans. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to brag to my friends, so I told my father, "Sorry, dad. I'm meeting up with Craig and every-

body later." My groin still buzzed from the day's events. I wanted to boast, to brag about how long I lasted, how she screamed for more, how her mom came home and all three of us did it.

Dinner lasted an eternity.

Finally, the meal was over, and I left my house while my father and mother savored cordials in the living room, the opening strains of the Campbell Soup Theater ringing through the house.

Outside, I could almost hear the blacktop hiss as the cooling dusk descended. The kids from the neighborhood were hanging out a few houses away under the high streetlamp, playing poker. Egg saw me, and yelled, "Yo, I-suck! Get your ass over here."

He sat with Greg and Hoop on the sidewalk in front of Hoop's. They had a gray, plastic poker-chip carousel and a deck of cards from one of the Greg's parent's trips to Circus Circus. The streetlight had just come on directly above them, and it cast a dim halo through the twilight.

Egg elbowed Greg in the side, and said, "Yo, yo. This motherfucker has got some talking to do. You didn't get none, did you?"

Greg waved his arms in the air and chanted, "You didn't get none! You didn't get none!"

Greg was something of a ladies-man. He didn't need to hear what I had to say, and his voice was loud and taunting. Hoop was quieter. A science buff, he built strange machines for fun: weird devices that looked like erector sets, but boiled water with compressed air or powered ceiling fans with potatoes. When

he turned sixteen, his father bought a dragster, and made his son the driver. Every few weekends, they drove out to the desert racetracks, and Hoop steered the super-powered isosceles triangle over the quarter-mile long track at speeds reaching upwards of 200 miles per hour. After you've hit six g's, sex isn't that exciting. Plus, that night, it seemed Hoop was thinking about graver things. "Did you knuckleheads hear that the Strangler is in the neighborhood?"

Egg sneered and said, "Shoot! Like, I would jump that fool if he tried to come down Chapter."

He and Greg gave each other high fives, and Greg said, "Dude, if the Strangler wants to mess with Chapter Drive, he better be packing more than a pen knife!" They gave each other high fives again, as Hoop shook his head in disbelief.

I sat down to join the game and Egg handed me a few red, white, and blue chips.

As Hoop dealt the cards, he related what he had heard about the sighting. "Somebody saw him shopping for rope at FedCo. But by the time it was reported, he had run off. Shit, he could be anywhere in this neighborhood."

I felt a little spooked by the possibility that, as the night gradually dipped the neighborhood in landscaped shadows, a serial killer might be lurking nearby. Twilight was almost over, and save for the dim ambient glow issuing out of the nearby houses, we were practically sitting in the dark. We played poker, and as the game progressed, the conversation came back to my little adventure.

"So, man. What happened with Shirley?" Egghead asked. "Did you pop her cherry? Did you ride the Hershey Highway? If it was me, you know, I would have wore her out. You know, I have a huge—"

"Egghead, shut the hell up." Greg threw a blue chip at his head. "Dude, you need an electron microscope to see your little pecker."

"Man, fuck you!"

Egg stood up and began kicking Greg in the ribs. But Greg was a good six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. He grabbed Egg's leg, lifted him off the ground, and slammed him into the Hooper's lawn. I could see this was going to last a little while and put my cards down to help Hoop pull them apart. Egg and Greg fought a lot. We all fought each other a lot. It was normal, and I expected to get back to the game, and, eventually, the story of my conquest in Reseda.

Then without warning, every one of the streetlights on Chapter Drive flickered out, and we were in complete darkness.

"Holy shit! Holy shit!! Holy shit!!!" Egghead cried. "It's the Strangler! It's the Strangler!"

In a flash, we all raced inside Hoop's house, knocking over a table and a chair in the foyer, scurrying into the tiled dining room, and finally, scudding up against the wooden, white Venetian blinds and gazing in terror into the black street.

"What's going on, boys?!" Mrs. Hooper cried.

In unison, the four of us hissed, "Shush!!"

From my position, wedged between Egg and Greg, I scanned the portion of the block in front of the house. There was nothing but the murky shadows of carved topiary and luxury cars.

Egg suddenly cried out, "There he is. Shit! Holy Shit!!"

Greg shouldered him into the corner, slapped his big hand over Egg's mouth and said, "Shut up, you idiot!"

My heart raced, and I dreaded what the lumpy object a few houses down the street might prove to be. I squinted into the darkness and saw the shape of a person. But it was only Mrs. Butterworth, Hoop's neighbor. She was unloading her trunk of groceries. *Oh sure, five foot two, forty-eight-year-old Mrs. Butterworth could pass for a serial killer. Who knew what was in those bags? Hot dogs? Twinkies? A gutting knife?*

"It's just Mrs. Butterworth," I said softly.

Greg shook Egg against the wall, and told him, "Dude! I am going to kick your ass after this is over."

Mrs. Hooper tugged at Hoop's arm, and said, "My heavens, Scott, what the heck is going on?"

Hoop turned and hissed, "The Strangler, Mom! The Strangler! We were sitting out there when all of a sudden the streetlights just went poof! And that crazy bastard, he's probably out there."

"Language!" Mrs. Hooper whispered.

Hoop looked at his mother and rolled his eyes.

"Listen to your mother, my boy," Mr. Hooper cautioned. "No use letting a little serial killer ruin your manners." He craned his neck for a glimpse into the impenetrable blackness, saw perhaps his own reflection in the window, and made a strategic decision, announcing, "Well, it's probably nothing. But perhaps we should notify the police. Honey, would you hand me the phone?" Mrs. Hooper smoothed her apron, lifted the green receiver from its cradle, and handed it over to her husband, who adjusted his bifocals and began dialing with slow determination.

"Hurry!" Egg said.

Then, just as fast as they had gone out, the lights came back on. The streetlight threw an oval pool of light around the abandoned game of poker.

Mr. Hooper hung up the phone.

After a good thirty seconds of silence, Egg pulled himself off the wall, straightened his shirt, and yelled out, "Yo! The Strangler bet' not mess with Chapter!"

All of us, even Mr. And Mrs. Hooper, yelled, "Craig, shut up!!"

A tense second passed. I thought Greg would lay Egg out with a thunderous right cross. But he didn't and after a few more moments, Greg burst into laughter, and then one by one, we all joined in, even Egg. The community was safe. The sanctity of Chapter Drive would not be sullied by the Suburban Strangler. Egghead Craig was a jerk, but hey, he was *our* jerk.

Mr. Hooper asked his son for some help in the garage. Egg, Greg, and I headed back outside.

The chips and cards were scattered across the pavement like fallen heroes, the kings and queens now strikingly two-dimensional. The game seemed a little irrelevant at that point.

"Well, I guess I'm going home," Greg said. "Isaac." He gave me a slap on the back. "Egg."

"Asshole," Egg replied.

They laughed and shook hands, going through all seven involutions of the Chapter Drive secret handshake: the clasp, the pound, the flick, the whiffle, the spasm, the birdie, and finally, the snap.

As Greg walked away, Egg elbowed me in the shoulder and said, "Now, c'mon holmes. What about the betty?"

"What about her?" I asked, grinning widely.

Looking out toward the horizon, over the geometric subdivisions stretching into the sunset, I saw the clouds form a high drama of gas and vapor and momentum. The smog seasoned the sky with a terrific effluvia, and the pattern accentuated what had become a profound inner calm, as if the day's silky thread had stitched a new tissue of awareness that made me somehow more fit for life. And on that night towards the end of a decade of excess, at the outer reaches of the Angeleno sprawl, as Chapter Drive darkened, Egg gave me a strange look, half closing his eyes and inhaling, perhaps smelling the lingering scent of sex. Then in a slow, crackling voice, the first syllable elongated to the point of breaking, Egg said, "Ehhhhh. You're like in love, aren't you?"

I just smiled and let it flow. "Egg," I told him, "You should know where I'm coming from. But, you're just dumb, ditty dumb, ditty ditty, dumb dumb."

Later that week, the Strangler was captured in East Los Angeles walking through his old neighborhood. The hearty blue-collar men and women spotted him and, without running inside to hide, without calling the police in a panic, without throwing their poker chips in the air in mortal fear, they tackled him at the knees, and sat on him until the authorities arrived.

13.

Eclipse

I would see Shirley a few more times. Easy, casual lovemaking in the back of cars, at a nearby vacant lot on a discarded mattress, in the bathroom at the mall, but we didn't seem to have much to say to each other and we drifted apart. One day she called me from the Reseda Hospital detox ward. She had developed, unbeknownst to me, a cocaine habit, and the last time I saw her, she was in a blue and white hospital gown. She came into the visiting room, and I gave her the Happy Meal I had purchased for myself. She took it and, after a few moments of silence, went back inside.

At fifteen, I had passed the driver's test. And at sixteen, my parents gave me the dog's car, a brown Volkswagon. On one Saturday morning, nothing else to do, I drove my brother downtown to Seventh and Flower where Bridges met in an office building converted into a Presbyterian Church.

The group formed a circle on the carpeted floor.

"We need volunteers to speak at Encino High School," someone said.

"I'll do it," Naima offered, and I volunteered to drive.

A week later, I sat in a large classroom on the campus of Encino High. Naima's friend, June, went first, relating her experiences growing up in Cambodia. Her family members had been murdered by the Khmer Rouge, some of the

killing occurring in her presence. By the end of her presentation, the audience of formerly restless teens was very quiet.

Naima rose before a sea of white faces. In the meeting the previous weekend, many things had been discussed, much of which I now forget; but I do remember a moment, a moment that seemed routine, where everyone around that seated circle took a few minutes to check in with the group. Naima admitted how nervous she was speaking to the high-schools, how she always felt a basic fear of public speaking. But if she was nervous, I couldn't read it in her face as she readied herself to speak.

She said, "You've just heard June's story. Her story is a story of war, of refugees, of immigration to America. But there's a war going on in this country too, even if you don't see it around this neighborhood." She paused, searching the room, meeting my eyes, and moving through a rhetorical gaze at the crowd. When she continued, she said matter-of-factly, "I'm not here to entertain you, I'm not here to make you laugh. I don't want you to clap when I'm finished. I don't want your approval. I'm speaking with you today to give you some information, some information about my life because the youth group I'm part of believes in building bridges, believes that the biggest obstacle to creating a better society is that Americans don't know their neighbors." As she talked, she remained virtually motionless, her feet slightly splayed, her hands only rising occasionally to gesture. "I look around this room and I see a lot of surprised faces. Maybe you're wondering what this girl is going to say, what could she possibly tell me that would be interesting? Well, I'm not gonna' say anything that, on the surface,

will surprise you. You've all heard the stereotypical story: poor black people, living in the ghetto, strugglin', ludda ludda lud. The thing of it is, there's a reason stereotypes exist." Some of the slump-postured kids seemed to right themselves, hearing the ding of some inaudible bell. "Stereotypes are like the title of a book: they give you a general idea of something. There may be a solid grain of truth in that cover. But I want to talk to you about what happens when you actually read the book.

"I live in downtown Los Angeles. In the neighborhood I live in, I hear gunshots all the time. I've seen a gun battle between rival gangs. I've seen a shootout between the police and those gangs. I've seen three dead bodies. I've seen a man shoot himself in the head. And there's other things I can't tell you here, now.

"In the neighborhood I live in there aren't many houses. Most everyone lives in an apartment. Sometimes ten people share one room. Many people are homeless and sleep on the street or sleep in makeshift shelters made out of cardboard boxes. Many people have to choose between food and electricity.

"In the neighborhood I live in many people don't have a job. Most speak Spanish as their first language. Every few weeks, some are rounded up by the INS and, whether they're citizens or not, taken in caged vans to the downtown INS holding center until their status is verified. Many of these same people sell marijuana and cocaine and heroin from the street corners of my neighborhood in order to feed their families. They sell those drugs to people like yourselves who I see drive in from the suburbs. And the only reason I know they're from the sub-

urbs is they're white and that's the only time I see white people in our neighborhood. And not to blame anyone, because if there is one thing we tell each other over and over again at Bridges, it's that no one's pain is greater or lesser than any one else's. That's just the reality of my neighborhood. Hey, I don't blame you for all you have. Enjoy it. But just to let you know."

I looked around and saw faces blush, saw limbs move, saw bodies adjust themselves and their weight.

"In my neighborhood there is physical violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse in the home, mostly because of these drugs. And I've seen my own family become, become awful. My own mother, god bless her, wake me in the middle of the night and haul me out of bed by my hair and ask me what I did with her drugs.

"And what can you do in those situations, you know? How do you reason with a parent who's high? Someone who's supposed to guide you, but who's smoked their mind away? Someone who you want to see as a parent, but who you yourself have to parent? What do you do when you're six years old, and you have to steal your mother's welfare check so you have enough food for you and your sister to eat?"

She finished. Despite her opening instructions, the students gave a tepid applause anyway. Afterwards, a few ventured up to June and Naima, cordially shaking hands; the majority filed out the back exit, the shuffling of their well-clad feet on the polished tile floor the only indication of movement.

On the ride home, in contrast to the somber spirit of their talk, Naima and June were full of humor.

"You were amazing," I told her.

"A-ma-zing," June said, leaning from the backseat, and pulling her friend's shoulder. "I think you have an admirer."

"An admirer? Oh, lord. That doesn't sound good."

"Why not?" June said. "He's cute."

She moved her eyes up and down my body, and shook her head in faux-derision. "He ain't bad, I guess," she offered, dryly. Then she burst out laughing and shouted, "For a guy with a huge head."

"A huge head?" I gasped. "What are you trying to say?"

"That your head is as big as the moon. That thing could block out the sun."

June and Naima lost it, their mouths opening wide, the sound of their laughter like cannon volleys, their hands on their bellies, shaking.

"*Eclipse. The moon touches the sun,*" I crooned.

"Oh, no!" Naima cried, "Your singing is horrible!"

June said, "I think I'd rather get out here."

15.

Mota, Roca, Crush

A few days later, I ventured east along the Ventura Freeway, transferring to the Hollywood Freeway, further into the inner city, exiting at Alvarado, passing Korean Bar-B-Q restaurants and lavanderias, seemingly thousands of people milling around MacArthur Park, finding Hoover, and, finally, Naima's shambling two-story lilac building. Instead of Chapter Drive's ranch-style expansiveness, Hoover Street was divided into concrete blocks, dirt yards, and apartment buildings pushed up against each other, fighting for space where there wasn't any, the cries of children mingling with the tuba-heavy, oompah timbre of Ranchera music and street vendors pushing carts, ringing handle-bar bells, selling salted corn for a nickel, and crying out, "Eloteeeee! Eloteeeee!"

A long yellow barricade stopped car traffic from turning right into the adjoining street. I parked and walked past a man in filthy blue trousers. He cradled a brown bag, his thick, disheveled beard glittering with beads of liquor. As I headed for the entrance to Naima's complex, he waved his finger at me and said, "Cuidado, cabron, cuando que pasa de esta puerta."

The entrance to her building consisted of a heavy, black-grate gate, and when I rang for apartment 204, a woman answered, her voice the consistency of smoke, saying, "Who this?" The voice came out of a speaker welded into the side of the stucco wall. Someone had scratched the names "Joker" and "Puppet" over and over into the silver plate of the speaker box, and when I heard the voice

again I imagined it came from some factory where crackheads sat around carving gigantic letters with their remaining teeth.

"Hello," I said, suddenly awkward, "This is Isaac Abramowitz."

The voice said, "Who?"

"Isaac. Naima's friend."

The street seemed suddenly alive with foot traffic. Young men swaggered past me in clusters of threes and fours, everyone wearing crisp blue and gray pants made out of some coarse fabric, their arms shooting out of white wife-beaters in muscular vectors, whistling and muttering "Mota" and "Roca" at slow-moving cars.

I heard a loud buzz, the door unlocked, and I entered Hoover View Apartments.

Inside, I saw the building was shaped like a wide, rectangular donut. In the middle, a patch of grass competed with the dirt for sun. Four young children played with a green hula-hoop beside an inflated foot-pool. When they saw me, they stopped and stared.

"Hi," I said.

One of the little boys waved. I heard a shout from an adjacent apartment, and the boy put his hand down. An old woman wearing a blue shawl poked her head out of a door and stared at me. I found the black railing to the stairs and bounded, two steps at a time, up to Naima's apartment.

She met me at the door wearing red running shorts. Her smooth, round calves and thighs were elegant and erotic and enticing. When she turned to in-

troduce me to her mother, who sat on the couch watching television, a shiver of desire traced a spreading fan of affection from the tip of my spine down through the blood heavy sack of my balls. I felt a little giddy, but I forced myself from staring, and approached her mother, who pursed her lips as her eyes--the long lashes heavy with mascara, the lids above green with shadow-- gazed out through what looked like a cut lens.

Her mother wore a long, blue blouse and green sweats. She sipped on a can of Colt 45 with one hand, and held a cigarette with the other. Her pupils were no bigger than pinpricks.

Naima shook her head, and said, "Well, get the introductions over with. Come on."

Her mother laughed quietly, her voice the chuffing texture of ash. She looked askance at her daughter, took a short pull on her cigarette, and blew the smoke out the side of her mouth. She offered me her slender hand, and said, her voice a low growl, "Name's Maude. Pleased to meet you."

"And you."

She coughed, and asked, "So what do your folks do?"

"They work," I said, avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, yeah?" she replied, nodding, taking another drag on her smoke. "Well, well." She put her beer on the glass counter top. A plastic ashtray lay next to the can with the words--"Skoal. Takes you higher"—barely visible through the heap of stubbed out cigarettes and ash and the plastic tips of Phillies cigarillos.

Maude got up from the faded black leather couch and headed towards the kitchen.

Naima leaned against the door and said, "Hey, Isaac. Let's go for a walk."

We went down the steps. The kids were still playing in the courtyard, though the water had all been splashed out of the makeshift pool, and the old woman was drying a naked girl with a small red towel.

Naima led me through a back exit and into the alley.

We passed a dumpster and several dilapidated cardboard boxes that seemed to have people living inside them. I smelled the heavy scent of sweat and marijuana. I slowed, inhaling the sweet fragrance. We went through a hole in a ripped, wire-mesh gate, and into a vacant lot before she stopped, and pulled three glass pipes out of her pocket.

The pipes were about three inches long. On one end, the glass tube tapered to a fine slit; on the other end, the round hole was stained with black marks. The length of the tube was choked with bits and pieces of some viscous, black substance. They smelled like hell.

"What are those?"

"Crackpipes." She looked at me in disbelief. "Shoot, don't people in your neighborhood get high?"

"I might have smoked pot once or twice."

"Pot? That ain't a drug." She scanned the ground and found a broken piece of cinder block, a rutted grey slab about two feet long. "Pot just makes me sleepy. But crack? Bring crack into your 'hood and you get this." She swept her

arm across the vacant lot, the homeless living in cardboard boxes, the drunk pissing against the alley wall. "I didn't invite you over for this. But shit happens. I found these just before you got here."

I stared wide-eyed, speechless.

"Don't act so surprised, man." She gripped the heavy block with one hand, placed the pipes on the ground, and brought the rock down hard, giving them six solid thumps, the glass suddenly crushed brilliance under the glare of the sun.

When she finished, we sat on the edge of a discarded big-screen television--the front end caved in, the guts hanging out of the back--and threw pebbles at the beer bottles on the other side of the lot.

"I don't think my mom can help what she does. She's been doing this for years. I've smashed her pipes so many times."

From behind one of the cardboard boxes, someone hissed, "Oye, pequita linda. Escuchame. El pinche policia son los que traen su madre eso mierda."

"Callate, por favor," Naima shot back.

She leaned against me, and I put my arm around her. I pressed my nose against her braided hair, and she smelled like strawberries. I drew my face down to hers, and I searched for the sweet swell of her lips.

But she pushed me away, saying, "Uh-uh."

"What?" I gasped, sheepishly.

"Don't you think you're movin' a little too fast, Mr. Man?"

I started to answer her, but I slipped off the end of the television, hitting the dirt with a thud.

Naima started to laugh, covering her mouth with her hand, and said, "See, like my mom always say, 'God don't like ugly.'"

When I got home later that evening, my parents asked how my visit to Naima's house had gone.

"Fine."

"What did you do?" my father asked.

"We watched MTV."

"Great," he boomed, his face beaming with what seemed like pride.

16.

Balanced Diet: Lysergic acid diethylamide and Cuervo Gold

While Naima was struggling with her mother's addiction, fighting against a neighborhood awash in the hailstorm of crack cocaine swept up from Central America into the inner-city under Ollie North's velvet rope, swept into the dirty streets of Pico-Union like falling chad, I was heading in the other direction. By the time I was fourteen, I had begun to crave the sweet release of late-afternoon bongloads in the leather seats of Egghead's BMW. But what had began, much like reading, as a source of consolation, became less and less a vacation from the mold of managerial parents, and more and more like medicine. And the antidote to anxiety was repeatable anytime I took a hit. I began to crave this familiar ritual and it became the Judaism I never had. The one god, the High God that took me to the Mountain Top and, once in a great while, to the Promised Land.

So, in the summer of my sixteenth year, having discovered the consolation of books and pot, it was a short trip, on a bright July night in the middle of a throwaway decade, to search for relief in a little white tab of LSD. That Egghead and another friend and I ended up driving the long, strange Topanga Canyon Road from the Valley to the Pacific; that Egg decided he must purify his peace ring in the ocean; that the ride back gave me my first glimpse of how the doors of perception could be, if not cleansed, altered to the degree that curves on the Road back to the Valley didn't stop when the car continued but fanned out in magnetic trails, my vision something like a slow motion unfolding, the expansion of time

into infinite moments. For these incidental reasons, whomever this Isaac might have been without drugs dissolved forever in the solution of lysergic acid diethylamide.

Though Naima enthralled me, the comforts of Chapter Drive cast a spell on the trick lantern of my mind that was not to lift without some higher magic.

When I was seventeen, I traveled with Egg and Hoop over the hill into Hollywood for a party at Hoop's brother's place. His older brothers lived off Normandie and Melrose Boulevards in an old studio bungalow, the kind built in the thirties to house Hollywood carpenters, and assistant pa's, and stunt men, and then left to gentrifying suburbanites and immigrant professionals living below the mansions that dotted the Hollywood Hills.

When we arrived, the twilight had descended. Dozens of people stood around in small groups drinking and smoking, the wispy trails off their cigarettes streaming in mazy paths above their heads and through a cluster of stripped palm trees. Hidden speakers blared Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released," but no one seemed to be listening.

Hoop pulled me into the kitchen where his brother, Andy, was giving some sort of presentation.

"Our kitchen is our temple. We put all our sacred things in the cupboards. Let me show you," he said, twirling around in a circle, his hands above his head, his fingers like bulrushes in the Nile.

He threw open the cupboard above the sink.

A hush swept through the five of us who stood watching. Every bit of space was filled with empty José Cuervo bottles. There must have been dozens, row after row of empty bottles glinting in the blue of the spinning strobe light mounted above the sink.

"I am impressed," Hoop said. "Mom's gonna love that, Andy."

"Ah," he nodded in agreement, "then she'll really die over this." He opened the rest of the white cabinets in the kitchen. The two over the stove, two beneath the sink, four over the opposite counter top and pantry closet—every available square of space was filled with empty José Cuervo bottles.

Egg elbowed me and said, "Hey, holmes. That's our cue. Do you want Cuervo or tap water, esse?"

"Does a dog shit in the woods?" I quipped.

"He might if he looks like you, holmes."

"Hey, I look good."

"No, she looks good."

He pointed at a woman in a red dress, her ruffled décolletage just low enough to reveal something to cleave to.

Andy poured everyone a shot of tequila. We licked the salt off each other's elbows, slammed the burning mouthfuls of alcohol into the back of our throats, and sucked on sour limes as somebody turned up the music: Public Enemy booming through each dizzy wavelength of the shadowy apartment, Egg pulling himself onto my shoulders and waving his fists in the air, instructing

everyone, along with Chuck D, to "Fight the power. Fight! Fight! Fight the powers that be!"

I asked the girl in the red dress to dance.

The music changed, becoming a lilting Latin melody. As we held each other, I learned her name was Tasha, and she was a dance student at UCLA.

I told her I was a philosophy major at USC, "I'm a Trojan who reads Nietzsche. I'm an existential prophylactic."

"A what?" she said, her mouth agape as she led me through a simple meringue.

"Yeah, yeah," I continued, the tequila kicking in. "Nietzsche said, 'God is dead.' But hey, God called me just the other day. Anyway, I was reading some lite-Kierkegaard. Something about boredom and the rotation method, so I let the machine pick up." She giggled, and I took the lead in our easy dancemaking. "When I called God back, I said, 'Dude, everyone says you're dead. What's up with that?'"

She pulled back, using my chest as leverage for her slender arms, and lowered her chin, coy and alert.

So I reached down and rubbed my hands against her ass. I know, it was not a strategy likely to cause swooning. In an instant, she shoved me and shouted, "Jerk!" Then she disappeared into the crowd.

I felt the sting of rejection but managed an inebriated shrug and walked over to stand with Egghead, who was laughing at me like a drunken ass.

We stumbled outside. The night sky was a violent rose color, the lights from the city staining the low-lying clouds like a cathedral at dawn. It could have been any time at all. It could have been heaven's noon on Alpha Centauri for all I knew. We'd smoked a joint in the car on the way over, and as we shared another under the rustling palms, I felt wistful. Almost sad.

"Yo, Egg," I said.

"What?"

"We should go to the mall. We always meet chicks when we go to the mall."

"Yeah, holmes! That would be awesome!"

"Shirley."

"Shirley, ehhh."

Egg started reciting a new rap he'd memorized, changing the words as he saw fit. I listened to the first few lines—"Brass monkey. That funky monkey. I am a honky. I am a donkey. You are a beastie without no pee-pee."

But I lost interest momentarily in Egg and observed the rest of the scene. The garish music and the frantic conversation and the chants of tequila drinkers urging their buddies to greater heights of bibulous fraternity.

Surely, there must be something better than this.

17.

Beer Bongs & Mouth-to-Mouth Resuscitation

But I was unimaginative, and my discontent dissolved in the desire for more of the same.

That weekend, my parents took a trip to New Orleans, and I did what any other kid in possession of a large suburban house, a few friends, and a couple of fifties would do: I threw a party.

It started out as a small gathering. Just Egg and Greg and Shane and Hoop. But news of the parentless house spread quickly and by eight o'clock there were a hundred smoking, drinking teenagers, and, when I wasn't slamming bong-loads, I was answering the doorbell and welcoming people inside.

At one point, a drunken classmate tore the door off the doorframe.

Unfazed, I went outside into the backyard. The night air was warm. The persimmon tree was in full bloom, and the fruit trembled and glittered like Christmas ornaments. I took off my shoes and socks, and found a group of girls I knew from school sitting, feet in the pool.

There were three brown-haired, brown eyed things who I knew--from the rectangular coiffure and Aqua-Net hardened bangs, from their eyelinered eye-sockets, from their sequined shirts spelling out the holiest of shibboleths, "Princess"; from their exclamatory "I knowwwwoh"s—were females of the Jewish variety. These were double-Xed, twenty-third chromosomal species of my wandering ancestral line.

I plopped my feet in the water, splashing the one nearest me.

"Oh—my—god!" she exclaimed, each word of this three-note melody separated from the other by the sonic grate of totally Jewish indignation. Impressed, I began to splash them as the light Santa Ana breeze rustled their long, brown hair.

I had passed through my Captain Intergalactic phase, I was weaning myself off of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, and, obsessed with my parent's collection of Flower Power literature, tried on the hip phraseology I came across in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.*

"Further, further!" I cried, motioning for room on the steps leading into the pool. "Ladies, ladies. Allow me to apologize for raising the waters around you."

The one I'd splashed, Gina, a girl I knew as an inveterate gossip, whose voice seemed slightly less annoying than a crow's, became feisty, and sent a great splash back at me. I could see from the wine coolers ringing the edge of the pool that they were drunk. I splashed her back, and the other two allied themselves with their friend and thoroughly soaked me.

Hoop ran out of the kitchen and cannonballed into the pool, a great wall of water rushing out from the point of impact, splashing over the edge and soaking the leather boat shoes of those forced by the growing crowd to move outside, a collective groan rising up as their argyles and tube-socks became squishy.

"Hoop!" I yelled. "Part the Red Sea, baby!"

Other people followed him into the pool, the water gradually emptying out, finally, when the cannonballs and splashing ceased, settling a good three inches lower than normal.

I looked at the three girls. Gina was staring slack-jawed at the scene. Fully clothed adolescents drifted in inflatable rafts across the pool, clinking mixed drinks. One young girl had stepped on the brick landing above the water, removed her leather jacket, her blouse, her bra, and chest bared for all to see, began to shake and shout to the lyrics booming out of the living room.

Pour some sugar on me! Ooooh, when you need some love!

Egg and two other guys were standing over my mother's bed of clowns and pansies. They took turns filling a beer bong--a long rubber tube connected to a giant plastic spigot--with a six pack of Budweiser; two emptying the cans into the spigot, the other putting the tube in his mouth, and when the six pack had filled the tube, releasing the narrow end with his thumb, and guzzling the whole thread of amber brew into his gut before turning and projectile vomiting onto the ornamental grass.

"Oh, that is so totally gross," Gina exclaimed.

One of her friends grimaced in reaction to Gina's exclamation, and when I looked at her, she winked.

"Rebecca?" I said, inquisitorially.

"Yes?" she replied, lowering her head.

"Have you ever seen my collection of black-light posters?"

She seemed taken back by my question, and looked at Gina and her other friend for support. Gina took her by the arm, and rose to lead Rebecca out of the water, but Gina stumbled drunkenly. In one awful flail, her hands flew up, her body fell back and she smacked her head on the hard, cement edge of the pool. She sank like a stone.

While the revelers continued unaware of the emergency, I dived into the water. Everything was murky blue and black, the floodlights turning the pool into a shifting fabric of shadows. I could see Gina's face. Her mouth was open, bubbles trailing out of her nostrils like a string of beads. Her eyelids were heavy, her body limp.

I got to her and hauled her to the surface, pulled her out of the pool, and laid her, face up, on a towel.

"Oh, Jesus!" Rebecca cried, "Gina!"

A circle gathered around us, hovering, offering commentary.

"Dude, give her air."

"Totally."

"Ohmygod! Let. Her. Breathe."

Someone emerged from the crowd. He was older, perhaps twenty-one, and knew first-aid. After a full minute of mouth-to-mouth, Gina came to, coughing up water.

Just then, Greg yelled, "Cops!" and a stampede of drunken teenage suburban socialites headed for the street, as I would later learn, taking the two side gates and depositing them down the street on the Hooper's lawn.

Gina sat up, Rebecca kneeling down to help her, and I walked into the house. Two uniformed police officers were standing in the living room looking at the debris. Empty beer cans and bottles lined the rosewood entertainment console. Cigarette butts were smashed out on the marble floor. The frame to the front door, the white molding, threatened to fall at any moment.

One of the policemen said, "Who's the owner of this house?"

I brushed the wet hair off my forehead, and stepped up to them, saying, "I am, sir."

He scrutinized me and, for a second, I thought all was lost, that I would be hauled away for unfathomable felonies, sent to wherever they sent juvenile delinquents. But he just shook his head and said, "Son, keep the noise down."

He turned and, with his partner chuckling at some private joke, they headed out the front door, shaking their heads.

I let out a deep sigh of relief, and closed the door, but it wouldn't shut, bouncing weakly against the useless frame. When I turned around, Egg had brought Gina and Rebecca, and her other friend, inside. They sat on the sofa in the living room.

"Dude. That was close," I told Egg.

"Hey, esse. I can't believe the pinche cops came. Unreal, man!"

Gina recovered her indignation and, rebuking our Chapter Drive optimism while she rubbed her head, croaked, "Oh. My. God. I almost drowned, and you guys can only think about how cool it is that the cops showed up."

"Gina," Rebecca said, taking her friend's hand and reassuring her. "Isaac is the one that pulled you out."

Gina's mouth fell open, and she assumed a pose of affection, hugging me and crying, "Oh, Isaac! My hero."

I cringed, and she finally released me.

"Does your head hurt at all, sweetie?" Rebecca asked.

"No."

"Maybe she wants a bong hit," I said.

"Is that the only medicine you have to offer?"

"Listen, babe," I said, "Nobody but the fuzz knows we're here, and they're off to the big Donut-hole in the Valley. We have a very sick head to mend." As after a rock concert or following an explosion, the house was both curiously empty and abuzz with silence. And so I filled it with what I though was oratory, pointing at Gina, and crying, "And if she ever wants to be groovy again, she'll need a long trip on the magic bus. You dig?"

Egg started slapping his hands against his thighs, snorting laughter spraying the air with a fine mist.

"My head is about to explode, and this donkey thinks it's a laugh riot!" Gina rolled her eyes, and, right then, insisted on leaving, invoking God and Barbra Streisand in a flurry of pique.

"No, honey, no," Rebecca pleaded. "You better stay where you are for a few minutes. You just bumped your head, sweetie. Be still. Isaac, what about something for her head?"

"Yeah, baby. Egg, where's that bong?"

Egg stopped laughing and got up. "I think it's over here," he said, lurching into my bedroom. When he returned he had the bong, and a bag of dope. As I sat on the edge of the couch, the top aperture of the smoking apparatus rose a full foot above my head. Egg pulled a pungent, crystallized, golden-haired bud out of the bag, and jammed it into the end of the pipe.

"Ok, Miss Cousteau, now do some real deep-sea diving."

Gina didn't hesitate, fishing a lighter out from some unknown place, directing the yellow flame over the pipe and inhaling. A billowing column tumbled through the chamber, and when Egg saw her flick off the flame, he pulled out the stem, and the whole gray snake disappeared into her wet body.

While she held the smoke in her lungs, I handed her a beer. She took a deep swig, and when she exhaled, the smoke was gone.

Rebecca was next. And in a half hour, we were all stoned out of our gourds. I found my dad's *Bitches Brew* album, and, as we listened, I snuggled closer to Rebecca, as Egg found Gina a now-willing intimate.

I woke in the morning to the sweet sounds of bubbling water. It was Rebecca. She must have pulled the bong into my bedroom, stuffed what remained of Egg's supply into the cold stem, and fired up.

"Wow," I teased her, "you're quite a connoisseur."

She inhaled a tremendous hit through the four-foot chamber, her cheeks billowing out nearly to Dizzy Gillespie dimensions, finally exhaling a long, thick

stream of snow-white smoke. I did what I could to inhale some of the fumy exhalation, my mouth gulping the air like some oxygen-starved goldfish, but most of it sailed out my window into Chapter Drive.

18.

Palmer's Kiss

Rebecca lived a few miles away in Tarzana, near the country club. Her parents had a membership, and we snuck into the club late the following Friday night, "borrowed" a cart, and fired up cigarillo-sized joints while trying to stay out of sight of the security guards. She drove us to the far end of the golf course. Stoned, we stood leaning against each other on the hilltop under the sweet, oily scent of the eucalyptus trees, I could see across the whole night-lit Valley. And despite my heavy-lidded eyes, the electrified lines of the city grid pulsed at attention, a clear map of the spiritual landscape.

"It looks like a giant fish. But all you can see is the skeleton."

Rebecca pushed my shoulder. "Silly boy." She raised her long face and looked down her aquiline nose at me. Tenderly, she said, "Isaac, let's make something to remember." She reached into her backpack, pulled out a notebook, tore out a piece of paper, and said, "Okay, lie back."

I paused but she pushed me back and said, "Oh, trust me."

I sank into the high, wet grass, and she laid the paper on my chest and began tracing her hand, slowly moving the lead across the rise and fall of my chest. I could feel the pencil press into my body, and, though the pot seemed to diminish my mental alertness, it heightened my physical awareness. As she traced out the contours, the length of each finger, the swell of the flexor muscles below her thumb, I imagined she wasn't just making a pencil drawing, that this wasn't just

a simple exercise in affection, but that she was engraving an image of permanence. And it made my skin tingle and burn.

I sat up, and she showed me her work.

"Your hand is so small," I said.

"I'm a girl. Geez. Let's see yours."

At the edge of the course, a ring of low-lying path lights cast a small glow into our little pow-wow. My hands were wet from the grass, flecked with strands of dirt and wet blades. I rubbed them against my shirt and held my outstretched hand to her. She met me, and we made a palmer's kiss.

"Here," I motioned for the paper. "Now you lie back."

Her hair had drifted across her face. She pushed it back with her hand, tucking it behind her ear. "Okay," she said, "but go easy, I'm ticklish."

She lay back, and I pressed the paper against her gray Harvard sweater, the insignia a dull red against her chest. I put my hand on the white sheet. I could feel the outlines of her breast beneath my hand. I turned the paper over, and I began to trace, each curve of my palm and fingers approached with an adagio friction. When I reached the tip of my pinkie I stopped and looked at her face. Her head leaned to one side. She was looking up into the sky, searching the hot stars.

"You look so beautiful right now," I said.

She lowered her chin towards her chest, and sighed, staring into my eyes. I could hear the wind rustling the eucalyptus leaves at the edge of the green. I could smell their sharp fragrance, and the heavier musk of the grass. I could

hear music from a party down the hill. I finished tracing my hand, and when it was done, I looked at Rebecca again. In the shadows and light, the small glow coming off the path lighting, I felt like diving into her big brown eyes and staying.

"Isaac," she finally said, "Do you believe in fate?"

"Shush," I said. Putting my finger against her lips. Then I kissed her softly. And I pulled her close, and we lay in the grass until everything was drenched with sweat.

The next day, she pulled the paper out of her backpack.

"Look at what you've done," she insisted.

I had traced my hand over hers, almost exactly.

Rebecca and I were like two pieces in a two-piece jigsaw puzzle. Her parents, like mine, were in a nosediving relationship. More importantly, she and I were *Cannabis sativa* devotees, and we worshipped at the altar with the regularity of the devout. She was also highly bookish, and though we started the day by hot-boxing the car in the parking lot before school, we helped each other through classes. Writing each other's essays. Testing one another's knowledge of less literary facts: the names of Saturn's moons, the dates of Civil War battles. I was always mixing up Gettysburg and Antietam.

And I did well in high school despite dozens of absences, my unique education in the classics, my lambent display of strong verbs and colorful adjectives, all part of an unspoken legacy. Though I would sip long neck bottles of Dos Eq-

uis sitting on the roof of my Chapter Drive home during hot afternoons while I should have been in class, I made nearly straight A's, was a National Merit Scholar, and chose from a sweet cluster of Ivy League schools what would be the next logical step in the indulgences that were my life. Someday I too would own a house on a street like Chapter Drive.

At the graduation ceremony, the class president—who would later become an investment banker, raising money for eToys and Genomics—explained the difference between an interview and networking. "An interview is a business conversation. Networking is the lifelong web of interrelationships that help you grow your wealth and pass it on to your children."

I gained early admission to Oberlin College, and, as a graduation present, my parents sent me on an extended vacation through Europe with Rebecca.

19.

Divorce, Then Sex at 30,000 Feet

From our train seat looking southwest over Tuscany, the sun swelled. The patchwork of pastel villas and turreted castles, rolling grape vines and olive groves – the old world gradually disappeared in the darkening paint of the Italian dusk.

Rebecca slept silently against my shoulder and, though my fast approaching move to northeastern Ohio strained our relationship, the romance of travel, the train rides through the Italian countryside, the smell of freshly baked bread on cobbled streets filled us with a quiet delight.

We continued on as far south as ancient, dusty Pompeii before heading north towards England.

In London, we stayed with my parents' friend, Noe Bellington.

"Are Saul and Sarah millionaires yet?" I remember Noe asking.

"I guess," I said, "I really wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't know? Why?"

"I guess that's just not something we talk about."

"Americans can be quite permissive with their children. But I always thought your mother and father were very committed to raising a family."

The Bellingtons had children at the same time as my parents, and their daughter, Sherry, was my first "girlfriend," as my mom liked to remind me.

I spread butter and blackberry jam on the hot loaf of crusty bread while I pondered how to respond to her observation.

"Well, they are just like you and Alan."

"Alan? Shite. We haven't been married for years. Thought you knew. Something else your parents didn't tell you. Alan's off living in a castle in Sussex with his lovely *young* wife. I tell Sherry and Terry the god's honest truth: *their father is a bastard.*"

Later, the sisters and Rebecca and I climbed through the second floor window, and tiptoed down a ruined brick wall and into Hampstead Heath, where we smoked hash in a meadow.

"This is so nice," Rebecca said.

The stars were faint above the bright electric city. It was breezy, and I put my arm around Rebecca's shoulders.

"You look like a goner," Sherry said, handing me the joint.

"No more."

"Yeah. Suit your self," she said, passing it to Terry.

"Thanks."

"Sherry, did you hear what mum told the baker?"

"What a load of codswallop?"

"Oh, you know you're batty for that looker."

"Oh, shut up you old cow."

The sisters leaned into each other and laughed at some deep, private comedy. I pulled Rebecca close and whispered, "Will you ever forget this?"

"No, never Isaac. We will never forget this."

I kissed her neck and held her head with my hand, pulling her closer and inhaling her sweet smelling, brown hair.

Ten days before our flight out of Heathrow, I called home from a bulky red London telephone booth on West End Lane.

My brother answered.

"Hi, Alex."

"Isaac?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"Isaac," he cried, "Mom and dad are getting a divorce."

"What?" I shouted.

"Mom went crazy and threw all dad's shoes in the pool. Everyone's screaming at each other. It's nuts here. You should come home."

My mother came to the phone. "Isaac, Isaac, Isaac," she cried, "Your father--. O! Oh!! Isaac. I'm so sorry."

I dumped heavy silver shillings into the blocky yellow telephone until I ran out of change. Rebecca and I got on a plane the next day. 35,000 feet over the Atlantic, we snuck into a bathroom and made love.

Two weeks later, I flew to Cleveland.

20.

Horny-handed Sons of Toil

Immediately after arriving in Oberlin, I began smoking pot alone in my dorm room, an ounce Egg sent me through the mail from California.

My first snowy day came a month later. I put on the old, green Army coat I had purchased with Rebecca in a North Hollywood thrift shop, and when I stuck my hands into the pockets, I felt the dry crush of paper. I emptied my pockets and found a half dozen, small folded sheets. They were written in bright red ink with Rebecca's exuberant cursive. They said, "I love you!" "I miss you!" and "Will you marry me?" They frightened me and I threw them in the trash.

Though I wasn't much of a trumpet player, I joined an informal big-band run by the conservatory students. We were called *Swingtime* and played the retirement home circuit up and down Lorain County. Most of the other band members were top-flight, conservatory musicians just in search of fun. Although the trombonists, Ben and Mike, were political science majors and had shaved the words "Horny-handed sons of toil" into their beards, each with half of the Marxist clarion call. My father had bought me a silver plated Conn 18B Constellation before I left, and I shined it to a dull luminescence.

But I wasn't that good and played fifth-chair, sitting so far down the line that while the rest of the band swung, I often had time to watch the wheelchair

bound, white-haired men and women lift themselves with wobbly arms from their seats and dance to the music.

The band wasn't paid much. Maybe twenty dollars a man per gig, but we enjoyed all the turkey and mashed potatoes and brown gravy we could stomach. As many bottles of Rolling Rock as we could hold down. Through the boozy stupor, I sang "Pennsylvania 6-5000!!" and played my negligible part in "The Stripper" with manic verve.

On most other nights, my dorm room was the bong capital of campus. I had become part of a tight-knit group of independent-minded underclassmen. My buddies and I constructed an enormous water pipe out of a forty-gallon Seagram's Gin bottle, a giant red hookah stem, a small green garden hose, and a deluxe double-filtered fish-tank motor. I'm not sure what the filter did. Anyway, we called it the Death Star and it sat five at a time. Obedient to the buzz and warble of bubbling bong water and combustible, hallucinogenic weed. And when the leaves began to fall in autumn, we tromped through the drunken streets kicking through piles of heavy red and gold maple leaves, every week bringing a different surprise: A pound of shake from Kentucky, a sheet of LSD, a bag of magic 'shrooms from Albuquerque. The high becoming more routine. My parents and their problems becoming a distant lull in the background of a noisy smoky room, the music growing louder, the lyrics more confrontational. Playing Digital Underground and Guns N' Roses and N.W.A. --

"Fuck the police. Fuck fuck fuck the police" --

jamming our speakers into the second-floor window and sitting on the grass below in a wading pool smoking Swisher Sweet cherry cigars while the Conservatory professors ran out of their white Conservatory halls screaming, *Turn that damn music down*!

Getting into the mystics—Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Buckminster Fuller's *I Seem To Be A Verb* and going mad mad mad with Ginsberg and Kerouac as I wandered the old village streets, ghosts of the Underground Railroad beside every tree, the leaves bright red with autumn time. The sky a torn piece of cloth.

21.

If The Doors of Perception Were Cleansed

One night, Mullen handed me a small white pill.

We each ate one mescaline hit at about four p.m. on a Friday in October in Mullen's third floor room in Noah Hall.

For no good reason, as good as any other, we decided to leave town and see the farmland.

Outside, the sun stained the glassy, cloud horizon with surrealistic pink shapes that took on biblical likenesses: King David singing in the ancient temple; Isaiah and the angels, the supernal beings holding the hot coal over his thick pink tongue with heaven's golden tongs; Gabriel, reconfigured as Miles Davis, trumpeting the return of the Light. I rode a bike and Mullen stole somebody's skateboard. We headed west, through leaf-strewn streets of clapboard houses with covered porches and slate chimneys and black weather vanes and triple glazed casement windows shuttered from the setting sun. Oberlin is a small town and we reached the end of it and farm country in just a few minutes. I wasn't riding very fast but Mullen skated like mad, furiously beating the ground with his foot, his face full of teeth, his mouth pasted in a perpetual grin.

He made me nervous.

But soon, the mescaline kicked in and I felt the world buzz anew, as if seeing everything—the strip of orange and red on the horizon, the brown smudges of the fields, the long black thread of the road, the flutter dance of the

birds all around—for the first time. The land stretched out from that deserted highway, unwinding toward the horizon, curling through the farmland, threading the whole world together.

I realized for the first time that Ohio wasn't flat. The brown and green earth rolled in low waves of field and wood. Paper birch and alders stood in clumps around the streams that cut through long acres of dry corn stalks. Water hemlock lined the road, their white tops swaying. A small wooden fence ran along beside us, jagged and torn in places. I stopped to rest and I felt a great surge of emotion. I reached down and grabbed a handful of dirt, then let it slowly sift through my fingers. Time slowed. Each particle of sand seemed to stitch itself into my skin. They formed falls that the breeze picked up and carried in a spreading fan to the earth.

And then it was as if a knife fell from the sky and cut me in two.

I fell away from Mullen and my family, my mother's and father's and brother's faces, rose up before me and were sucked into the distant horizon. Still, I resisted. I felt like yelling, yelling *if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.*

Mullen grabbed my arm and whispered, *God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.*

It began to snow, light white fluffs bouncing against my head, sticking to my neck.

We went back into town and stopped at the college athletic field. On the west side there was a small rise.

Mullen said, "Let's ride down the hill."

A thin layer of snow coated the grass. I rode down the incline, the wind blowing through my hair like a long, cold hand.

I remember getting back to the brick dorm. Leafing through Aleister Crowley's *Libre*. Mullen whispering Crowley's maxim into my ear, *Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law*. I became very afraid. Suddenly, I felt an imbalance in the room and inside me. As if the electrostatic forces between my body and Mullen's body might tear apart at any instant. As if the tension between the roof and the walls and the scaffolding of Noah Hall were stretched to the breaking point by some invisible hand.

I had to get out, get away. Back to my dorm room. Away. To lock the doors. Away. A way out of what was fast falling apart within.

People crowded through the halls, slumped in doorways, and when they looked at me they sneered and hissed. They became twisting red snakes, and they spit on me through the occult slits of their sickle eyes. I had to get away. Was there nowhere safe? I ran to my room, rushed inside, and locked the door.

I sank to my knees, and the room spun like a top, the floor becoming a black swirl, a sucking vortex. I was falling and I couldn't breathe. Oh dear god, if I could have only controlled my breath, stopped the spinning, spinning, spinning ... My mind was a giant ear and it rang and rang and rang till I was ready to puke. Ringing, ringing, ringing—a great gonging of the world and all its noises— birdsong, gossip, scraping metal, the pitter-patter of footsteps in the stairwell, the wind shaking the autumn leaves, the squeak of a bicycle chain, a

violin in the distance tapping out the opening strains of *The Rite of Spring*. So many sounds! They moved through me; they spread over me; they threaded their way through my mind until what was once a somewhat coherent, reasonably functioning organ became a frayed and tangled improvisation pushed about by the slightest murmur, even the silence a clattering machine.

The noise grew louder. In the hall, Mullen was at the door yelling, *Isaac, do what thou wilt is the whole of the law, the whole of the law!*

The room spun like a lunatic dreidel. Nausea welled up from my gut like a great green groaning wave, churning my insides, my mind cut loose from all its tethers.

I could hear each and every person breathing in each and every room in Noah Hall.

Students walked below my window in groups of twos and threes, and every word they uttered seemed a comment on my bewilderment. And when they looked up at me in the window, their eyes pierced into my soul.

I gasped and rushed for the bathroom. Mullen was outside the door, and he whispered, "Hey, man. Don't look too deep, you might not find anything to hold onto. Heh, heh."

I rushed back to my room and locked the door.

22.

Breakdown, #1

I didn't sleep much for the next three weeks, turning my heavy steel frame bed on its side, the steel box spring forming a wall to my right, my wooden dresser forming a barrier at the adjoining end, the dormroom wall on the opposite side, and two sash windows opening out into the green plaza between the dorms of North Campus. I could look out the window where I saw my well-clad peers joking and flirting and being brash, while I cowered on my sweaty mattress. I didn't go anywhere but classes, where I thought my heart was beating through the walls while I gripped the plastic seat, everyone in class staring at me with juridical scrutiny.

If only I could have slept!

But though I sucked hit after marijuana hit, hoping to narcotize myself into somnolence, I couldn't fall asleep. I would start to doze off and a fear would well up deep in my gut, something like the fear of falling from great heights, like falling from the moon to the earth. After a while, I was afraid to fall asleep. Each time I nodded off, I would yank my head off the pillow and stare out into the dark Ohio night. Sleep was a great drop. Even when it did come, I dreamed I was awake.

I called my father.

"Dad, I-I-I feel so lost."

"Well, what's wrong? Have you been outside?"

"I can't go outside. Everyone knows things about me. The way they look into my eyes."

"What do they do?"

"They know things," I said.

"Isaac, maybe you should take a hot shower. And shave. Have you shaved recently?"

I called Egghead, but all he could say was, "Dude, you took mescaline? Awesome!"

I called Rebecca, finally, having avoided calling her for two months.

"Well, well. If it isn't the world-traveler himself."

"Rebecca, I'm not doing well."

There was a moment of silence. I could hear other voices in the room with her. In my paranoia, I thought they somehow knew something about my plight, that they could feel my unease through the phone. Hurriedly, I said, "Rebecca, I think I'm having a nervous breakdown."

"A breakdown. See what happens when you neglect those you love?"

"No, this isn't about that. I smoked too much pot, took too many drugs. It isn't working."

"Well, come home then."

"Really?" I cried, tears rising to my eyes. "Really? I could just come home?"

"Yeah," she said. "But we're all stoned as Mt. Rushmore here, sweetie. I don't know if I'd be a good influence."

"No," I said, sadly. "No. You're right. I mustn't be a killjoy."

I said good-bye and lay the phone in its cradle. I leaned against the window ledge next to my bed, my head a stone.

A little while later, I called Hoop and Greg and Shane, all of whom seemed distant, trite, unable to comprehend my trouble. All the glitter and gold of suburban status, of all that stuff, had been revealed as a thin layer of polish on a once shiny, new car. And now, a dirty rain had fallen on the vehicle of my lucky youth; the sheen was gone. I was left with only the dirty surface, and I wanted to drive off the cliff.

It all got too much for me one afternoon, sitting in the library, an essay due by the end of the day on Coleridge's fragment, *Kubla Khan.*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan ... My mind froze. It was all I could do to formulate the most basic thoughts. *Think. Essay. Thesis statement.* . . . *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan* ... Too much, too much information. Traces of ideas. *The conflation of European romanticism and African sexuality.* Distractions from throughout the library. The heavy breath of the student in the next desk. The way the sun slanted onto the slate tiles. The librarian clunking books back onto the shelf—thud, thud, thud. *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan* ... Questions launching themselves in my mind and tugging me into the deep waters of thought where I seemed anchored for hours at a time. *Did he find himself or lose himself? Did he trade his privilege for love? And what was in it for the Abyssinian maid?* ... *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan* ... So what? So what? So what! I was thirsty. My left earlobe itched. I smelled oranges and tuna fish sandwiches. ... *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*

... I sat in the library, my eyes heavy from lack of sleep, my mind racing, and I couldn't compose a single, complete sentence. The blank pages of my notebook seemed to ignite, curling into a twisted torch, the fire enveloping me, turning my very skin to melting wax. I ran my waxy hands over my waxy face and they were not my hands.

I rushed back to my cloistered bed and stayed there. The next day, I saw a counselor, and he recommended a leave-of-absence.

The night before I left, Mullen threw a going-away party. We gathered around the giant bong, the Seagram's bottle filled with six quarts of Kahlua, and when I inhaled that chocolate-flavored smoke, I looked at the faces of these young men and women and felt I had failed them all. They would stay and graduate and become SAP VPs and Pakistani coal barons and concert violinists for the Cleveland Symphony. And I would be a college dropout, a drug addict, a schizophrenic.

On the plane home, I looked out the window. It was the height of Fall, and northeast Ohio stretched out like a flowing quilt of trees, red and gold leaves heavy with the expectation of winter.

23.

Priest

Officially divorced, my dad had moved from Chapter Drive to a posh condominium six blocks from the beach in Santa Monica. My mom had moved in with her mother in Sonoma County. Forced to pick a parent, I chose the familiar realm of my father and the city I knew.

Every morning, I woke to the sound of him squeezing orange juice, the motorized burr of the juicer grating against my heart, reminding me of all the hard work he was doing.

But we hardly spoke.

I spent much of the next few weeks in bed.

I hadn't called Rebecca, afraid of the temptation to get high. So I called the only other woman who had touched my heart. I called Naima.

She got right to the point, "Hey now. I heard from your bro' that you havin' a rough time."

"Naima, I am a shell of my former self," I muttered, my voice barely audible.

"Well, maybe you need to sit on the beach for awhile. Dry off a little bit."

For awhile I did stay drug-free, enrolling in Santa Monica College and taking a class in local botany. But soon enough the allure of escape, and the ritu-

als of escapism, returned and I became once more a willing wanderer in the maze of intoxication.

One day, walking along the Venice boardwalk bouncing anxiously between encampments of Gypsy palm readers and vegetarian activists, bricolage artistry and stands of woolen socks, I passed a man who whispered, "Kaya?" And I met my new dealer, a Jamaican who called himself, affectionately, Priest.

A few days later I had smoked the entire eighth of an ounce, and I was scraping my makeshift pipe, a smashed and punctured Diet Coke can, for resin and combing my bedroom carpet for flakes. I returned to the old altar but the magic no longer sparkled. When I wandered the Santa Monica streets, the ocean breeze cut my chapped lips. When I walked along the boardwalk, I had a heightened sense of the smell drifting off the Pico storm drain sewage runoff. When I saw nubile women skate by in hip-huggers and bikini tops my thoughts became furtive and violent. I followed one woman all the way past the pier and two miles further to where the bike path joins Pacific Coast Highway. My mind was not right, for I fantasized about overpowering her, about tackling and dragging her somewhere into the oleander bushes. When the otherwise glorious sun set over the Pacific, I saw a final curtain on the light, the onrushing gloom of an end time.

Though school came easily to me, and I soon had a full schedule and was able to transfer to U.C.L.A., everyday I woke and got high. Then I went to school and got high. I began purchasing shots of hard liquor at the corner store and spiking cups of soda, sipping the sharp drink as I walked up Pearl to school, the

scent of jasmine trees, their buds opening in the nightocean breeze, only intensifying the thrill of my ritual loneliness.

Most of the time, I holed up in my father's house, my head against the screen of my bedroom window, staring mutely at the churning Pacific, my inner life swept out with the tide, stretched in the arc of grief.

24.

Surrender

There is a reason that surfing is a little known cure for addiction.

A kindly employee from a surf-shop on Main Street gave me permission to take out their long Styrofoam beginner's board before they opened, free of charge. And there were clear-eyed moments of bliss on the water, when the cobalt blue stretched out all around me and I felt no longer like the nervous boy who couldn't sleep and was scared out of college by Kubla Khan.

But the cure was short lived. After a few weeks of early morning sessions, I gave in to the mounting tension and ended up at Egg's house for a game of poker and beer. Many, many drunken hours later, we headed off to replenish our stores of alcohol, and I dislocated my shoulder, planting it into a twelve-pack case of Miller Genuine Draft bottles as I turned to run from the AM/PM market, stealing what I could have easily paid for. To get the arm righted, having lost my medical insurance card, I impersonated Egg and was admitted to the emergency room at the hospital. They gave me a sedative. Four muscular male nurses and Egg held me down. And while Egg played me, I played him lying on the cold metal table as all five of them leaned into my dangling limb with all their combined weight and slammed it back into the socket with an awful crunch.

When my father asked why my arm was in a sling I told him I fell playing basketball.

"You just got to keep trying. Were you trying some newfangled shot?"

"Yeah," I lied. "I was trying to slam dunk and somebody undercut me."

"Well, don't give up. You have talent and can do anything you set your mind to."

My father's pep talk convinced me to venture back into the water a few weeks after the dislocation. And it did feel good, at first. The first morning, just after dawn, a team of dolphins played within a stone's throw, and I nearly grabbed hold of one of their dorsals.

One morning, waves larger than usual, I took a spill and felt something give. When I surfaced for air, my left arm trailed behind me like an afterthought, and the pain was so bad I began choking on the salty water. I had no time to waste. I was in the crash zone, an ominous wall of blue threatening to cover me in a final suffocating smash. I pulled the rubber cord, and gathered the board with my right arm. Somehow, I dived under the crashing surf. When I surfaced, the giant wave had passed and I threw my broken half onto the yellow board and kicked my feet again and again and again.

The shore seemed so far off, the houses on the horizon like the teeth in Mullen's snickering grin, and I wondered if I'd ever make it back. Somehow I got in front of a rush of whitewash, and it pushed me up over the rip tides running out to sea, through the rough chop of the inner waves, and onto the shore, the water sliding up the sandbank in an unfurling sheet. The wave reached its highest point at the edge of the first berm, then slowly began dragging me back into the roiling waters. I shoved my right hand into the thin scrim, feeling the earth through that slice of brown ocean and digging into it with all my might.

The wave continued its retreat, and I rolled off the board onto my back. I looked up into the sky; a thick layer of fog still shrouded Santa Monica. If I had been raised on God, I might have prayed. I might have given thanks. I might have given up the cynical shill of modernity, the secular poker face. But I just lay there while my whole body throbbed.

After awhile, I gathered my wits and stood up. Usually, even at that ungodly hour, you could see compulsive joggers bobbing up and down the forgiving sand. But the beach was deserted. My left arm jutted out at a violent angle. With my right hand, I grabbed my left forearm, took a deep breath, and with all my strength, shoved my crippled limb back into its socket. But it didn't budge. A violent bolt of pain shot through the length of my body. During the original dislocation at Egg's, I was so drunk, I didn't feel much of anything. That morning on the beach, I had no buffer, no anesthesia. I thought the pain alone would kill me.

I took three deep, steadying breaths. My feet sank into the sand and I stared at the ground. Everything fell very quiet. The squawking sea birds down the beach, ruffling their feathery wings in the grey air, the surf soughing back upon itself, the hum of Hollywood industry—everything slowed to a muted crawl.

I planted my feet firmly in a small rise in the sand and took a good hold of my left forearm. It was going numb. I dug my nails into my skin and, using the shore as leverage, threw all my weight towards the earth, into slamming that

damn ball back into its goddamn socket. I heard the awful, unnatural thwump! of tissue smashing together, and I collapsed on the sand.

I lay there in the pose of genuflection, a swarm of flies dancing over the fetid mass of beached seaweed laying a few inches from my head. The breeze throwing a torn hamburger wrapper against my neck. Tiny granules of sandstone and quartz--limestone and ground sea life, thrown up on the shore like everything else--pushed their way into my mouth and nostrils. I coughed, sending a small plume into the air and creating a shallow depression where I finally brought my head down in the sand. A sacrifice. Marooned on the trashy sand shores of Los Angeles. A shipwreck. A surrender.

25.

Honesty

The surest way for a white man to fall in love with a black woman is to look into her eyes and listen to her voice.

The night after my near drowning, Naima called me.

"Well, we're moving to Kansas."

"Kansas!" I cried, a rash of tension suddenly tracing its way up my spine. "Why?"

"My mom smoked the rent one too many times and we've been evicted. The sheriffs will be here any day."

"No!," I yelled. "No!"

"Yeah, well. We can still talk on the phone, write, you know. I'll probably be back some day."

"Can I see you before you leave?"

"Maybe. Can you come and get me?"

As I drove up Hoover, past sidewalks filled with pedestrians who carried children and work boots and bags of apples, Naima's friendship seemed to represent an answer to my troubles. I felt momentarily released from anxiety. I no longer feared the neighborhood that so recently splashed in the paintbox of my mind with the stereotypical gunspray of ghetto anger. When I pulled up to Hoover View apartments, Naima was waiting outside. When she got in the car, she handed me a piece of paper.

"That's my new address in Wichita."

As I took the slip, my fingers brushed her hand. She smiled at me, and when she rested her eyes on mine, she saw what must have been a trembling. She reached out and put her arms around my back and hugged me, rubbing my wounded arm. Her hands played against the frayed nerves of my psyche like a lullaby. Inside, I felt something leap up. I felt myself solidify and my awkwardness lifted.

"Are you okay?" she said, leaning back.

I nodded and carefully folded the paper with her address and phone number. Then I quietly teased her, my voice soft as drummer's brushes on a snare drum. "Madam, you entrust this document and its data in an institution of profound security." I slipped the note in my pocket and added, "Your deposit is quite safe now."

When we got to Santa Monica, my father was eating a tv dinner. When he saw that we had a guest, he took the paper napkin out of his collar, got up from his chair and shook hands with Naima.

"Great to see you, Naima. How are you doing?"

"I'm very well, Mr. Abramowitz."

"Great." It seemed everything was 'great' to my father. I fell asleep at midnight. "Great." I took a dump. "Great." I dropped out of school and ruined my life. "Great!" But Naima didn't seemed bothered by this show of exuberance, and beamed at him, joked with him about moving to Kansas, sat down in the dining room at the rosewood table and shared a glass of bubbly water.

Later, Naima and I walked off towards the ocean. The sun set over the waters. A few days before, I had seen the end of the world as the night sky grew, but that night with her, the stars were a warm glittering through a pale blue gauze.

"So your dad seems to be doing okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he did just go through a divorce."

"Yeah," I replied, sullenly. I didn't want to discuss this business of my father's. I grew silent, and Naima abruptly stopped walking.

We had reached the rise above the beach. A brick wall ran along above the sloping gradient of ice plants. A strip of grass bordered the street side. I leaned against the wall, looking out at the sea. The sun had descended and the waves were a tattered sheet of gunmetal gray. I could see joggers and skaters and bicyclists furiously racing up and down the wide promenade running between the parking lot and the sand.

"Isaac, you know, you got real quiet since I brought up your dad."

For a few moments I said nothing, and Naima stared at me, her mouth slightly open in what I assumed was disbelief. Finally I said, "Can we not talk about that right now?"

"Isaac," she instantly replied, leaning against the wall, "You can't sweep this stuff under the rug. It'll just eat you up. You know?"

"Naima, what do you want to do with your life?"

She shook her head at me, disappointed. Then she nodded and told me she still wanted to be a scientist, each slow dip of her face a gesture of confidence.

"A scientist?" I mused. "That's ambitious."

"Why not? White people do it all the time. You just don't expect someone with my face to try and do that. If I was white, you wouldn't say I was being ambitious. You would ask me where I wanted to go to school. You would ask me what was my favorite subject."

"What does your mom want you to do?"

"Who cares? If my mom died tomorrow, I would go and piss on her grave."

I jerked my head back at the violence of the image and blurted, "Really?"

"Shoot, your parents are saints compared to mine. At least your dad gives you a roof and food. My dad would rather be in the streets doing drugs than work a job."

"I respect my dad but—"

"No, you don't. I can tell by your body language that statement isn't even true. How you blinked when you spoke. How your posture is all slumped and uncomfortable. I dunno, Isaac. Honesty is really important to me. If you can't be honest about your emotions, then what can you be honest about?"

We walked back, and just before I drove her home, we went up to my bedroom and looked out the window towards the ocean.

"This time tomorrow, I'll be in Kansas," she mused.

The electrified yellow lights of coastal hotels, millionaire mansions, and Highway One streetlights stretched out in a gradual arc toward Malibu. A fog-horn blew in the bluebrown twilight, the mournful sound suddenly less sad, a bittersweet blues. I heard the pigeons cooing to each other from the trees.

I put my arm around Naima, and we leaned against each other, our cheeks grazing, her soft skin tickling my nose.

26.

The End of Magic

A few weeks later, Egg called me and said he had a sheet of acid and did I want to tune in, turn on, and drop out.

On the way over, I pulled into a parking spot on Ventura Boulevard. Women in pink Christian Dior suits, their faces painted red, sashayed down the white sidewalk, tethered to their white poodles, chatting to each other. A shop-keeper, a hat and scarf seller, exited his front door, bells ringing as he pushed it open and lit a cigarette.

I went in an ice-cream shop next to the millinery, The Creamery. Inside, it was very light, the floors of the Creamery glistening like ivory, speckled with gray and blue. A young girl manned the scooper, and I asked for two scoops of butter pecan.

I found a seat at an empty black table and took my time with the ice cream, looking at the girl behind the counter.

I fished Rebecca's number out of the pool of memory, and, with the change from the cone, called her from the payphone in the back.

"Yellow?" she said.

"Is 'yellow' the proper way to answer the telephone?" I asked.

"Is that you, Isaac?"

"Yes, it is I, Captain Intergalactic, reporting for duty."

She laughed. "Well, what's up, Cap'n Crunch?"

"This phrase: 'What is up?' I know you earthlings use it as a euphemism indicating both greeting and inquiry into the present state of--"

"Isaac! Cut to the chase, dude. I got friends over."

"Friends?" I asked, "Well, I just wanted to connect. You know, we haven't seen each other for awhile."

Her voice was light, disinterested. "It happens. Some people can't stay on the Magic Bus."

"But I want back on the Bus. Do you know where I can purchase a ticket?"

She said nothing. I looked back at the ice-cream counter. Two women came in the store. A car honked on the road.

"Rebecca? Are you still there?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried, her voice an alarm.

"I'm sorry," I told her, pleading, "Please, Rebecca. Please let me come over. I want to make it up to you."

She sighed, and in that sigh, I heard the answer I needed.

When I reached her house, I killed the ignition, threw open the car door, leaped from the street to the curb, bounding up the brick steps to the big wooden front door. I rang the bell, looking around. Everything was in such control. The landscaping cut to that perfection I knew so well in my youth. The hedges

trimmed just so. The street clear of everything but luxury cars. Each car glistening, glowing with a skin of buffed wax.

I rang the bell and heard the first few bars of "Imagine" chiming. A moment later, Rebecca opened the door. When I walked across the threshold, I pulled her close, hugging her body, cradling her face into my chest. My mouth was dry, but I could taste what seemed like happiness on my tongue.

"I'm so glad to see you again," I told her.

"Me too."

I whispered into her ear, "I have so much to tell you."

"Well. Sit down on the couch with me and tell me all about where you've been."

"I thought you had friends over," I said, sitting. The room was my church, the place I had spent so many high-school days stoned, watching the sunlight trickle through the stained glass windows.

"I was lying," she said. Then she winked at me, again.

I crossed my legs, put my hand on her shoulder, and said, "Are you going to make me wait another instant?"

"So that's why you called," she answered, frowning.

And so I begged. I got on my knees, and pressed against her legs with my chest. "Oh, high priestess!," I cried, "Ruler of all that I am! Return me to the old rites!"

"Ommm!" She hummed, as she crossed her legs, and held her hands outstretched, thumb and middle finger pressed together.

"Silly Buddha!" I said, "You are holding out on me!"

"Ommm!"

Though I could see her try seriousness, she grinned nonetheless.

I saw she needed additional convincing. So I barked. I got on all fours and I barked. I scraped the carpet with my paws, sending a throw pillow into a stack of videos. Barking and pushing my back paws into the air, banging against the stone corner of the table. Barking and nosing into her thighs. I pushed her, pushing into the soft cotton of her teal sweats with my nose.

"Yiiii!" She squirmed, struggling to get away, but I held her.

"Rover rant reed real rad," I said. "Rover rant reed. Rover rant."

Finally, she cried, "Ok, Rover! I give up. I give up!!" She sighed and folded her arms together. "Geez, Scooby. You are one desperate dog."

She got up and went behind the couch, returning with a large blue bong. She pulled a bag out from underneath the cushion, reached inside and removed an amount the diameter of a quarter.

I held out my hands and stuck out my tongue, completely given over to beggary.

She handed me the bong. She must have used it right before I arrived; it was partially filled with ice and water, but still warm. She flipped her lighter with her thumb, and sent the yellow flame over the black bowl filled with that tangle of glinting weed, and I sucked it deep into my belly and held it there.

I felt the smoke snake its way into my gut, expand into something the size of a small child. My senses came alive: the dry, satin smooth of saliva against my

tongue, the sharp aroma rushing through my nostrils and setting off a train of questions all leading back to what seemed to split my life in two.

I coughed. Long hacking spasms.

Rebecca slapped my back, saying, "Whoa there, Scooby. Take it easy."

I sunk back into the couch, leaning my head against her.

"How do you feel now?"

A familiar strangeness struck. I felt the paranoia creep back, seeping slowly into my mind, making of the bright room a flickering cave of shadow and long drops and danger. But I would not let this control me. I would choose an altered state because in choosing I would enact my freedom. Or so I believed.

I somehow managed to lie to Rebecca, telling her, "Ho, ho, ho! Woo! That. Hit. A. Spot."

Then I told her about Egg's sheet, and she said she wanted on the bus, too.

We drove over to Chapter Drive where Egg and Hoop and Rebecca and I powwowed on the street in front of Egg's. We sat under a sycamore tree and Egg pulled out a three by five sheet of white paper, tiny perforations separating each tab into sixteenth-of-an-inch squares.

"Pure as the driven snow," Egg announced. "From my buddy in Humboldt where the Dead Heads and Pot Heads put their heads together." He snorted, and handed each of us a tab. I popped it in my mouth and sucked on the dry piece of paper, finally swallowing it. "Another?" Egg cried. "Another! Another!"

Hoop said, "I dunno. One is technically enough to make you legally insane."

"Aw, Hoop! Dude, you're already screwed then, holmes."

"No, Hoop's right," I said. "This stuff can fuck up your psyche. Turn your ego into your id."

"Not like that ever stopped you before, Isaac," Rebecca observed. "How many times have you dropped acid?"

"Yeah, punk," Egg cried, grabbing my calf in a pincer grip.

"C'mon," I yelled. I pushed Egg off of my leg, pushed him to the ground, and pinned his shoulders to the lawn.

"Uncle," he cried. "Uncle."

Suddenly the ground seemed to move in an undulating wave. "Did you see that?" I asked, the pot jumpstarting the acid's action.

Egg looked at me strangely for a moment, then grinned from ear to ear. "Oh, yeah! I-Hole! You are prepared for lift off, esse."

I let go of Egg, and sat on the grass, seeing the wind rustle the leaves of the trees up and down the street. "I can see the wind," I said, amazed.

Rebecca began to move her hands, fingers splayed, through the air, crying "Oooh. Ooooh. I want to Ooooh."

"Let's head for the hills!" Egg yelled.

So we rose up off the lawn in front of Egg's house and trudged to the end of the street, onto the wide dirt trail, and up into the mountains. At the top of the hill, the city below looked like a buzzing circuit board, a pleasing pattern of

shapes and lines. The grid somehow ordered my internal landscape, but then it changed. Suddenly, the circuit board twisted and became like a canvas, dashed with the disorder of splattered oils and discarded industrial objects. There was an old cylinder where once rose the hotel on Ventura Boulevard. There was a scurry of loose wires strung out in beaded ropes of clotted paint where once ran the straight lines of Topanga and Canoga and Winnetka Boulevards.

Egg said, "Ehhhhh. I am feeling it too, esse."

"Did you know that a being and a peanut fall from the sky at the same speed," Hoop announced.

"What?" Rebecca shouted. "How do you—"

"32 feet per second second meter."

"Dude," Egg suddenly sat on his butt in the dirt. "This is wicked. I see trails everywhere."

"Where? I want to see them," Hoop yelled.

"There," Rebecca yelled. "There goes."

I saw the three of them pointing at a spot hovering above the dirt and below the coyote bush next to the trail. The dirt rose and shrouded their elbows and knees. Space expanded. Suddenly, a great distance sprang up between my friends and me. The space grew larger, and I sensed a walling off of space. I was a little screw on the hinge of a tight box; the screw turned in its hole, the thread part of a horrible descent in the hills above the Valley. A spark inside my gut setting off a magnetic current pulling me down, down, down.

Hoop and Rebecca and Egg became people I knew nothing about; people erased by the down current, becoming strangers who might pass up the trail and never so much as nod their heads in parting. Inside, I felt a great weight and a long drop and the lunatic dreidel that followed Mullen's pill seemed to race up through the tunnels of memory and ring in my ears again; the ringing a frenzied silence, a noise of a great drop and the friction of that fall.

Then the firmament fractured, the paintbox of blue sky opening up, a Jackson Pollock rush of spattered spotchaos pouring through the vaulted heavens; the very air a stream of minute, iridescent particles.

Inside, this flux entered through the top of my head and washed in a torrent of fire down my spine. And those who know will say, they will tell you I got high and never came down. Which isn't the case, of course. But everything that was formerly as solid as the pyramids, my sense of a consistent self, was suddenly the rumored scent of last year's magnolias; the shake of dust in the air after someone dear has rose and left forever.

I ran down the dusty dirt road, down Chapter, that abruptly ancient Drive, dashing to the car. I looked back and seemed to see the matchstick outlines of Egg and Rebecca and Hoop at the top of the hill. Staring. I clenched my jaw. I licked my lips. My eyes darted from the dashboard to the street. This place. This place! The appearance of so much prosperity, the patina of arrival, of clean teal siding and deep brown loam propping up the beds of ambassador roses. Through the glare of light and another breakdown, I looked on the carefully managed flora and tidy architectural angles, the marbled lions leading up

to Egg's doorway, the lawn jockey to the left of Mrs. Bentley's garage, his argyle socks dipped in fresh checks of green and blue and brown paint—I no longer observed but had become some sort of magnet for the files of doubt in the lives of my kin. The files stood at attention now, they stood on my chest and, with a fine precision, began to flay at my skin, drawn by the magnet thumping away beneath my ribs.

I started the engine and gunned the car down the hill.

The air was hot, too hot. I opened the window and hung my head out as I drove, sucking air. By the time I made it back to Ventura, I was frantic, ready to hide in the trunk or pitch myself behind a row of dumpsters. The sky seemed a churning blue army of soldiers armed with rifles trained on my slowly moving car. I couldn't steer. I began to feel a growing force, some power not my own, directing me into oncoming traffic. If I held my hands in a particular position I could combat this pressure. I struggled, and steered my car crookedly down the fastidious lines of Ventura Boulevard.

Finally, I pulled over, frightened to the point of tears, and called my father from a roadside phone.

"Isaac? What's wrong?"

"Dad," I whispered, my throat choked with phlegm.

"Isaac, are you in trouble?"

I leaned into the phone. The force that would have me drive my car into a bus or a wall becoming a set of eyes fixed in the face of every passing driver, who

noted with fine calipers the extent to which I was disappearing into nightmare. Finally, I managed to say, "Dad, can I just come home?"

"Of course, Isaac. Come home. I'll be here."

I got back in the car and gripped the wheel, the notches a solid perch from which to control this trip. I would swallow my fears and grip that wheel as it turned me home. Eventually, I would arrive at my father's house. I turned on the radio, and tried to resist the power, the invisible hand driving my thoughts into the oncoming lane, into the passing bus and the rumbling pickup. I turned on the radio and sang, sang as if each syllable were a crutch, propping me toward safety--*Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a—(*drum roll*)--cage.*

I reached my father's house. Inside, it was cool. He brought me a glass of water. I sat. We talked. I told him the briefest of detail about the trouble I was having. He nodded. He shook his head. He offered support.

When I woke later that night, the pigeons cooing from the rooftops were a sad echo of a lost time. I kneeled at the window, pressing my face into the dirty screen. When the foghorn blew and a car drummed past on Strand, the graying city was bereft of magic.

27.

Routines

My father tells me I didn't move from my bed for some days, that when I did arise, I was violent.

I don't remember.

My father says that I was mentally ill, that I said strange things. That I didn't move. For days.

I don't remember.

When I think back on this time, ten years having passed, I remember an inner horror. A long scream in a place without sound.

Then eventually I wandered down to the Venice boardwalk, and among the tarot card readers, I found Priest, again. I settled into an easy routine, getting high as often as possible.

Once, I smoked a joint with a fifty year old man. He was a short, grizzle-faced drifter with the rough exterior of someone who had been outdoors a long time. It was a cold, grey late afternoon at the beach, and we sat in a hollowed out cement barrel in a sandbox, the wind flipping my shirt collar.

"You want to come back to my place?" the man said.

He stayed at a motel on Ocean Avenue; it was a room with a bed and a hot plate, a pair of jeans and two red flannel jackets stacked in a corner next to a Bible.

"Do you want a massage?" he said.

I got on the bed and he began to rub my shoulders. His hands were short and stubby. He had long, yellow nails, but he used his knuckles to knead at the knots in my neck and above my shoulder blades. When he asked me to take off my shirt, I got uncomfortable, and said I had to leave.

"Little pussywhipped fucker," he yelled, searching for a cigarette. He found his smoke, grabbed the Bible, and sat cross-legged on his cot. I waited to see if he was going to say goodbye, but he just opened the book haphazardly, falling open somewhere in the middle, and stared at the Prophets.

A few days later, on a typical day, I walked down to Priest's spot on the Boardwalk. He made his hand signal, a quick pointing in the direction of the alley. I walked around the corner, and in the alley, handed him ten dollars while he slipped the small bag of weed into my hand. I put the drugs in my left sock, and walked to a liquor store, where I bought a 7 Up.

This routine went on for many days.

But the high became just that, a routine. There was more excitement in the danger of getting arrested in the alley with Priest than the relief from the high.

I went to the Pussycat Theater on Second Avenue, paid five bucks, and sat in a seat in the middle. After about ten minutes, a man sat down in the row behind me. I heard him unzip his pants, and could hear him masturbating. I did the same. The next moment, he was sitting two seats away, and stroking himself. When he reached to grab me, I got up and ran out.

I began stealing money from my father, a hundred dollars at a time, smoking pot out of an aluminum can, walking down Lincoln to Pico and into Tokyo Massage, where young and old women, some perhaps so new to this country they didn't speak English, were paid to make me come. I came often.

28.

K.

My father began dating again. K. was a tall brunette from Chicago, who told me and my father on the first night she came over for dinner that I was on drugs and needed to do something.

"Fuck you!" I said.

"You don't talk that way to me. I'm not part of your family, and I will smack you across the face."

"Oh, fuck you!" I said, and picked up the glass of bubbly water, pulling my arm back, preparing to throw.

K. cried out, shielding her face with her hands.

"Isaac, be reasonable," my father begged. "Put the glass down. Let's talk."

I felt the glass in my hand, though in the moments that had passed I couldn't remember the reason I had picked it up. I had gotten high five times since waking that morning. I had also bought two mini-vodkas and a pint of orange juice at the corner liquor store.

"Isaac," my father said, his jaw set, "are you still using drugs?"

"No!" I shouted. "I can't stand being high. I crave reality."

"You're full of baloney," K. said.

"How would you know? You're just the desperate old pussy my father's renting for the night."

She picked up her glass of water and threw it my face. I lunged across the table and grabbed her by the throat. Her eyes narrowed to a pin, her nails scraping at my hand, my father pulling on my arm, the whole debacle over in a second. I slumped back into the rosewood chairs and sobbed. "Oh, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm sorry, sorry."

K. went into my father's bedroom and he followed her.

I went into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. Inside, I found a bottle of codeine left over from the shoulder injury. There were about two dozen pink tablets, and I looked at them for a heartbeat, tossed them in my mouth, and washed them down with cold sink water. I looked up and when I saw what stared back at me in the mirror, I reached for a heavy object, found a jade figurine, and smashed it into the glass. There was a shatter, and the mirror collapsed.

I turned around and threw up into the toilet.

Moments later my father and K. pushed their way into the bathroom, K. kneeling on the floor with me, and holding my head to her chest.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm so sorry."

She started to cry and rocked me in her arms. "You don't have to live like this, Isaac. Why do you want this?"

"I don't," I replied, my voice the timbre of crushed autumn leaves.

Then my father, standing above, his voice low and strong, said, "You have two choices Isaac: I'll help you get help or you're on your own, and you have to leave and fend for yourself tonight."

I looked up at my father, felt K.'s hot hands on my arms, and sobbing, mucus coating my tongue and my lips and dripping out of my mouth, said what any reasonable person in such a predicament would have said when forced to his senses, my voice now half as loud as a whisper, "Fuck you. Fuck all of you. Fuck you very much."

29.

Lester de Gravitas: Hot Shit

And the Pieces of Shit: A Theory of Recovery

A week later I moved into a halfway house and started going to 12-step meetings.

"New Life" was a two-story, Spanish bungalow in West Hollywood, run by an old junkie named Lester DeGravitas. From rough-and-tumble South Philly, Lester could have sold the devil the ten commandments. But he was realistic. He had seen so many die. His father, his mother, his cousin, his friends--so many sacrificed on the altar of addiction.

But Lester didn't dwell on death too much. After twenty years of sobriety he ran a small empire: three recovery houses in Long Beach, one in Inglewood, and one in West Hollywood. He'd written a book, *Rehabilitating Drug Addicted Teens*, commended by President Bush, Sr. He had a degree in "Substance-Abuse Counseling" from UCLA Extension. He even knew a smattering of Freud and Maslow. But the main element of Lester's program was what he called "ego deflation," or in the parlance of the day, "tough love." Most of the love happened on Thursday night when all twenty-some-odd house members gathered in the living room for what Lester called "group."

My first group, I was nervous.

My father insisted I continue to take classes at UCLA during the day. Afterwards, I rode the bus down Wilshire Boulevard past the La Brea Tar Pits, get-

ting off at La Cienaga to walk through the quiet West Hollywood streets until I reached New Life, on Fourth and Orlando.

That first group night, I gobbled a dinner of hot dogs, green beans, and a glass of punch, while the others talked noisily in the big living room. I walked into the melee and found a seat. An overhead fan swirled the cigarette smoke through the room. Housemates chit-chatted; the newcomers in boisterous displays of bravado; those wh0 had been there longer, in somber tones like the faithful before the appearance of the high priest.

When Lester walked in, he said, "Well, well, well. Look at what we have here. This is beautiful. A house full of addicts and alcoholics. It's so good to see all you mutts. You're in the right place. Let's get started and see if we can help somebody see through the wool they've pulled over their own eyes."

His skin was leathery brown, scored in the corners of his eyes with the impress of what I could only imagine was perpetual pain. He wore a denim shirt, stone-washed Levi's, old tan leather cowboy boots with flowery white scrollwork, and a belt with a shiny, fat "L" on the big, silver buckle. The trailing ends of a thorny, flowering red rose vine were visible where his arms stuck out of his faded, blue shirt.

His assistant, Clint, strode in after him with a notebook.

Lester looked around the room. In retrospect, his methods were brilliant. He searched the awkward torques of language, facial clues, slumped postures, anything to get the group rolling towards an examination of our spiritual nature. He could have started anywhere. I had been at New Life just a week. I tried to

look normal. But if you were in the "House," as everyone called it, normality was a difficult persona to create.

There was Charlie--a fifty-five year old drunk from Hawaii, who drove his car into Maui's Lahaina Hotel, the sixth car he'd wrecked, and didn't remember how he'd gotten to Los Angeles. Leroy--who hadn't any front teeth, having lost them when, thinking the police were on his tail, he jumped out of his sixth floor downtown flophouse window and "caught" himself on the third-floor. Mike—a thirty-four year old heroin addict with a personality disorder that hadn't quite yet been defined by the DSM-IV. I thought he was a bit "histrionic." On my third day in the house, I spilled some milk on the kitchen floor and Mike said, "Jeezus, man. You've just ripped a gaping hole in the goddamn fabric of society!!" And Robby--a short, nervous, curly-haired Jewish man with an obsession for OJ Simpson (OJ stepped on his foot once). And so many others.

Lester pulled out a pack of Marlboros, tapped the end of the box, and extracted a smoke. "Clint, you got a light?" His assistant pulled a silver Zippo from his jeans' pocket and flicked it. Lester stuck the end of his cigarette into the flame and took a deep inhalation, finally exhaling a giant rolling smoke ring. Then he sat back and slowly looked around, stopping at each person and nodding, before settling his gaze on a dark-haired Hispanic man and saying, "Tony. Mr. Alvarado. You look down, man. Clint tells me you're isolating a lot. Isn't that right, Clint?"

Clint looked at his notebook and said, "Yeah," reading off, "Monday, 11:43 AM, Tony: watching TV alone. Monday, 2:43 PM, Tony: in the bathroom for thirty minutes. Tuesday, 4:06 PM, Tony: reading, two hours."

"What does that sound like to everybody?" Lester asked the group.

"Sounds like someone who's trying to run away from his problems," Mike said, "Someone who's trying to suck us all into his little whirlpool of disaster." Mike swirled his thick middle finger around in the air to illustrate his point.

Tony seemed harmless to me. He was neatly dressed. His hair was combed. He appeared preternaturally polite.

"Well, Tony," Lester said, "are you isolating?"

"No. I'm just feeling melancholy," he said.

"Melancholy. Wow, three syllables," Lester said. "Hey Tony, I don't mind a good vocabulary, but I'm a practical man. You have to be if you want to recover. I can tell, you just want out. You can't cut it here." Lester rolled up his shirtsleeves, exposing his long rambling tattoo. "Listen, Tony. You think because you got some education, that you got a job, that you got something, that you're anything. That's totally insane." Lester paused and chuckled. "Look, Tony," Lester looked him straight in the eye and enunciated each word with slowly punctuated intensity, "You ain't got shit."

"You don't know me. I –"

"I don't know you, Tony?" Lester mused rhetorically. "I don't know you?" He paused for a long drag on his cigarette, the ash growing to a precarious length in the tense silence. Finally, Lester said, "Now, you're not gonna like

what I'm gonna say Tony, but it's the truth and the truth will set you free." The whirring of the fan seemed to get more violent, cutting the tobacco smoke into a million pieces. "Tony, I've seen you hundreds, probably thousands of times. You're just another drug addict. Yeah, you've got a new face, but you're the same guy I saw when I started New Life ten years ago. I know you, Tony. You're a piece of shit and the sooner you recognize that, the better."

I saw Tony fidget in his seat. Hell, I thought, what had I gotten myself into?

"Man, you've got nothing. Look around you. You're surrounded by those who couldn't make it on their own. Mike, Robby: their own mothers and fathers couldn't save them. This is the last house on the block, Tony." Lester paused, resting his smoke in the black, ceramic ashtray and clasping his hands together in an attitude of prayer, bringing them up to his lips. "Here's the moment of truth, Tony. Are you gonna do whatever it takes to stay sober? Are you gonna graduate the House?"

Tony shook his head and said, "You know, I never expected my stay here to be long. I don't want to 'graduate' the 'house.'" Tony raised both hands and gestured with his fingers the dipping rabbit ears, making sure to let everyone know his disbelief in this vocabulary. "I mean," he continued, "do I get a diploma? My goodness! Staying here the full year might be helpful for someone like Robby, but I'm different. I really wasn't that bad. I only did cocaine on the weekends. And my girlfriend says I can move back in."

A cry went up from the group. It was a cry of anticipation, of blood lust, of sport. It was what Lester had been waiting for.

"All right. Settle down you animals," Lester said. He waved his hands in the air, motioning for silence with tired ease. "Tony, you have got to be out of your fuckin' mind. How long are you clean, man?"

"Twenty-six days," Tony said, straightening his back.

"Twenty-six days," Lester mused, "Twenty-six. Man, that's good. That's good. And what did you do to get in here?"

"You know."

"I know, but not everybody here knows. We're a family. We're all in this together. My job is to give you three hots and a cot, and structure, and the experience of everyone pulling for each other, pulling each other's covers, making sure the person next to you is doing what they're supposed to be doing. So tell the family what brought you here."

Tony looked nervous. He scanned the room, then looked at the floor. Finally, he said, "I can't talk about it right now."

"Bullshit, Tony! Bullshit!" Lester fumed. "Clint, tell us what this asshole did."

"He was arrested for throwing Molotov cocktails at his girlfriend's house."

Lester took a last drag on his smoke and handed the precious ashtray on to the most senior house-member. All but two of the house members smoked. I smoked a pack of Camels a day. I was the newest guy in the house and number

twenty four on the list of people to smoke. It was all I could do not to chew my arm off.

Lester ran his hands through his short, feathery hair and straightened up. "Tony. *You* think you're ready." Lester looked around the room. Leroy shook his head. Robby giggled. I tried on my "disinterested" face (a phrase I'd come across reading Henry James's *The Ambassadors*). "Man, that's the craziest thing I've ever heard," Lester said. "You think," he said rhetorically, as if the phrase itself was an oxymoron. "You couldn't think your way out of jail. You couldn't think your way out of becoming a crack-head. You obviously weren't thinking when you threw those Molotov cocktails at your girlfriend's place. Tony, your best thinking is what got you here in the first place. And now you want to leave the people who scraped you off the ground, took you in, and breathed life into you?" He paused and addressed the rest of us. "Do we even want to waste our fuckin' time on this fuckin' asshole?"

Mike raised his hand and Lester pointed at him, saying, "Go ahead, Mike. What do you want to tell this prick?"

Mike rubbed his hands together, inching up to the edge of the couch and bellowing, "What I want to know, Tony, is why you're even here?" Mike's mouth fell open with the end of his question, his hand outstretched over his bulging gut.

Tony just stared back at him, daring him to continue.

Suddenly Mike stood up, his face as bright as strawberry fields, and pointed, his fat fingers jabbing the air at the end of each clause as he said, "Man, you don't care about yourself! You don't care about your girlfriend! And you

certainly don't care about being clean and sober! I want a new life. You want what you got, which is shit. Do you want to be a piece of shit, Tony? Do you? All I have to say, Tony, is *there's the fucking door*! There's the door, Tony!! Don't let it hit your ass on the way out."

Robby stood up, holding his crotch, and said, "Pussy!! Tony, you're a pussy!! Ha ha ha ha." Joey, one of two other resident brain-damaged acid-casualties, began singing the lyrics to Hendrix's "Manic-depression." He was suddenly joined by Wedd Lowell, former bluesman for Arthur Lee's *Love*, and downright dope fiend, who whipped out his Harmon F natural silver special harmonica and wailed into the bent night flat fives and sharp nines, the blues cutting deep into the West Hollywood air like streaking birds, like gunpowder, like thick strips of joy.

"Wedd!!" Lester yelled, "Put that thing away! Robby, sit the fuck down! Clint! Tell Joey to calm down. Jesus Christ!! You guys simply have no awareness of reality. Wedd? Your brother just O.D. last month. You're on the same road, my man. You know you can't just start playing the harmonica in the middle of fuckin' group. This is serious business, here." I could see Lester's face and his posture change. His mouth working out the anger. His hands shifting with each frustration. Finally, he relaxed and another change came over his face.

"For fuck's sake. Now, Tony. I know--," Lester laughed, a clotted tobacco chuffing laugh and said, "I know what you're thinking, Mr. Alvarado. Yes, yes. You want to go out and get high right now." Then his voice became a whisper, his head low, his frozen eyes looking straight into Tony, staring at him as if he

were a glass, transparent. As if he could reach inside and pick a stone off the bottom of his streaming body, saying, "You're so sick of all this shit, of people trying to make you whole, trying to give you a new life that you're ready to give up. You want to get high. You want to smoke crack right now, don't you? You want to suck the devil's dick, right the fuck now, don't you?"

Tony just sat there, a blank sheet.

"Admit it, Tony," Lester said, standing. He opened his arms and warmly added, "We all understand. Admit it. That's the first step, right? 'We admitted we're powerless over drugs, that our lives had become fucked up.' Your life is pretty fucked up, isn't it? It must be or you wouldn't here. Right, Tony? Right?"

But Tony was resistant, unwilling to change, perhaps thinking of something none of us knew anything about—a dying sister, or the smile of his towhead son. He said, "This is a puerile scare tactic. I'm not a criminal." He lowered his voice to a whisper, and said, "I'm not a piece of shit—"

"See. Tony. That's where you're wrong. You are a piece of shit."

No, no! This was too much. I would defend Tony. I would tell Lester he had gone too far, he had stepped over the line. This would not stand. I would make sure the Mayor and the City Council knew what was happening in Beverly Hills adjacent. I would call Spielberg myself and pitch a story about corrupt recovery houses. I would. I would.

But I just sat there and Lester continued, walking the length of the room, his boots heavy on the hardwood floor. "You see, Tony. Being a piece of shit is a good thing. If you're not a piece of shit now, how are you gonna be anything

later? This is the bottom, Tony. People don't get to New Life by accident. I don't think you woke up one morning and said, 'I'm going to be a crackhead today.' No. You are a piece of shit and the sooner you realize it, the better." He sat down like he had just passed judgment at the pearly gates and closed the books on a life. "We can't save everyone," he muttered.

Tony slumped in his chair.

"Well," Lester said, "What's it gonna be Tony? What's it gonna be?"

Tony straightened his glasses and said, "This isn't jail. I don't have to stay here. I'll leave on Monday. My rent is paid until then."

"Fuck you, Tony!"

"There's the door, asshole!"

Lester stood up and yelled, "Shut up, all of you." His eyes were pinned. Veins bulged out of his neck. He stared at Tony, his nostrils flaring bull-like. He pointed at him and said, "Man. Don't you know? Jail? This is death row! Yeah, you can leave. It's cool. Run." Lester pointed at me and said, "Isaac, were you here when Bread Davis died?"

"No," I mumbled.

"Mike, tell Isaac what happened to Bread."

Mike's face glowed with emotion and he leaned back in his chair visibly moved. "Bread was my friend, man. He just took off one day and they found him with his head blown off."

"Do you want to end up like Bread?" Lester asked Tony. "With your brains splattered all over the wall? That's fine with me. But you're not staying

until Monday. I'll refund your money. New Life doesn't want you. We need guys that will row the boat. If there's a hole in the ship and you're the only one that sees it, we're all gonna drown. We can't afford to be in the boat with you. You gotta swim for yourself."

Robby stood up. All five foot three, a hundred and thirty pounds of him.

A groan swept through the room, each house member falling back in his seat and shaking the air with a palpable irritation.

"Robby, what could you possibly want to say?" Lester asked.

"You know, Lester, maybe we're being a little hard on the guy. I mean, we're all fucked-up a little. I, I think Tony's maybe a little crazy, you know, but why throw him out. Just 'cause he's a Jew?"

Lester sat down, dumbfounded, and said, "Robby, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Tony's a Jew. And you're discriminating against him. All he wants is to be with his girlfriend who he loves and you're saying all this stuff about him like he's a piece of dirt. And this guy, Mike, who is he? Huh? Just some weasel with a big mouth. He ain't nothing. You probably couldn't hurt a fly, Mike. I'll fuckin' kick your ass!"

Mike stood up on the opposite side of the room. His arms were bigger than Robby's legs.

Robby continued, crying, "Come on, you pussy. You ain't shit. I saw your fat ass father in here last week. He doesn't love you. Your mother neither--."

Mike lost it and rushed at him. I stood up with the rest of the guys, Lester leaping right in the middle, arms braced apart, holding back the combatants like two sheets of tissue paper.

"Everyone sit the fuck down," Lester yelled, "And Robby. You're a fuckin' idiot. Tony Alvarado isn't Jewish. He's Mexican for Christ's sake."

Charlie raised his hand. His voice was the consistency of body lotion, and he said, "You guys are really angry. I think Tony just isn't ready for all this anger. What he needs right now is a little more love."

Everyone, except poor Tony, laughed.

Lester slowly leaned back in his chair, rubbing his ruddy hands against the trailing rose vine tattoos, and said to Tony, to everyone, "Man, there ain't no other way. You got to surrender to New Life. What are you willing to surrender to The House?"

Tony stared at him, his eyes a vacant flophouse.

"Does anyone know what a wall is?" Lester asked, shaking his head. "Look, some of you have heard this one before," he continued. "I came to Hollywood in 1975 and wanted to get clean. I stayed at 'Yeah, But ... House' for thirteen months and I was the meanest son of a bitch you ever saw. My father was in jail for murder. My mother had just been gang raped and burned to death by the mob. I was angry. If you looked at me funny I'd go off on you.

"I stayed at that house even when I wanted out. I would scrub walls with a toothbrush for twelve hours. I emptied the pool with a Dixie cup. You guys got it easy. Our groups lasted for days. Things ain't what they used to be.

"These aren't the old days. But that's all right. You got each other. This is family. Tony, you're family. Robby, you're family. And it's like you're just looking at a fortune cookie. You're stuck on the shit on the outside. You need the fortune on the inside. Anything you come up with yourself is based on what you already have. Tony, what do you have?"

Tony hung his head, and I felt very bad for him.

Lester said, "Who has the ashtray? Give the ashtray to Tony?"

"No, I don't smoke," Tony told him, "but thank you." He seemed resigned to his fate. When he spoke, his voice was a whisper. "Lester, you asked, 'What do I have?' Well, first of all, I have God. I have God." His voice trailed off and he started to sob. "Oh, Dios mio. ¿Qué he hecho?"

Lester gave Clint a box of Kleenex, and Clint walked across the room and handed it to Tony.

"Thank you," he said, his voice a scratch on an old tin can.

Lester crossed his legs, put his fist under his chin, and warmly told him, "Tony, I hate to be the one to bust your bubble, but you ain't praying to God."

Tony wiped his nose, and said, "What?"

"If you're praying to anybody, it's probably your alter ego."

Tony sat silent. No one said a word.

Time slowed. Tony seemed to sink into the chair, becoming a pale mound of flesh, his eyes like slits in a prison building. Lester stood up, paced the room from one side of the circle to the other, pointing at each one of us, his boots scraping across the hardwood floor. He came up to Tony, stood in front of him,

and said, "Lookee' here, Tony. It's simple. All you gotta' do is look down at your feet, that's where you are."

Tony winced and folded his hands across his chest.

"Hey. That's pretty good," Lester said to himself. "That's right. All you mutts. Here's whatcha do." He repeated his new mantra, "Just look down at your feet, that's where you are."

I looked at my feet. I was shoeless. My white athletic socks had holes in them.

Lester said, "Okay. That's enough on Tony. Let's move on. Who's next? Clint did you tell me David has been talking about visiting Barbra Streisand's house again."

Clint nodded.

"David," Lester said, "don't you ever learn?" The group moved on. Lester illustrated how David was a piece of shit, how Robby was a piece of shit, how all of us were pieces of shit. "And what better place to be," Lester said, "than right here, right now. You have to be a piece of shit before you can be hot shit like me."

The next day, Tony was AWOL.

30.

Privacy

New Life offered little privacy, filling each room with four to six men. It was hard enough being suddenly sober and going to college, but I had to come home and study in the House that Crack Built. Junkies detoxing on the floor next to the 'fridge. The lucky ones who stayed and sobered up for at least a few weeks, becoming oddities in their newfound natural state--older, more intimate strangeness leaking out.

A watercolor of Rimbaud hung above the toilet, the poet rendered in a jaunty pose by the oldest New Lifer, the sixty-two-year old Beat cartoonist, Dennis Erewonky. Lines from the "Drunken Boat" written out in his graceful vermillion cursive:

Free and fuming, decked with violet fogs

I who pierced the blushing sky like a wall

Bearing solar fungus and azure snot

The exquisite jam of all good poets.

Most of the time I read in my room while housemates argued over phone time, over who had left a dirty coffee cup in the sink, over their fucking good sense to get involved with newly sober Hollywood rockers who wanted them to fund their new album, their new tour, their experimental film; other housemates practicing Shakespearean soliloquies in the hall, spinning yarns about dropping acid with Timothy Leary as children.

My mind mixed the mysterious phrases of the high modernists with the plainsong wisdom of the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*, writing *the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit* in the margins of the Big Book's "We Agnostics" chapter where Bill Wilson assured me that "We found the Great Reality deep down within us." I walked through the nearby Beverly Center trying to feel *God culminating in the present moment.* My mind teemed with the hard-earned wisdom of wizened old-timers who warned those who would listen at meetings that "I drank until I pissed blood, 'till my kids wouldn't speak to me, 'till I finally had a moment of clarity and came to these rooms. Please don't leave until the miracle happens." I memorized all the cliches--"Let Go, Let God"; "Take It Easy"; "First Things First"—the phrases rumbling through my mind like some endless, thumping train of boxcars. But at some point in those first weeks at New Life, the Great Reality became too painful.

One night, I threw an electrical cord around a wood post in the garage, rigged a short noose, and stood on the edge of the weight bench, my toes edging over the end of the black cushion.

But the cord was too long and my feet hit the ground.

31.

Inexpressible

The eleventh step provides the following instructions: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him." I had begun praying, as suggested by Lester and many others I spoke with as I made my way through West Los Angeles AA circles. Praying was a strange thing for a secular Jew to be doing. With but the faintest literary--let alone devotional--knowledge of Moses, with little awareness of Jacob or Isaiah or Elijah, any of the Old Testament analogues that might have paved a traditional upbringing in keeping with the legacy of my ancestors, prayer seemed a curious combination of Christianity and cultism. It was odd to be kneeling at my bed and praying for everyone I could think of; it seemed part desperation, part performance. And, like Lester said, wasn't I just praying to my alter-ego?

But I found a place called the Shambhala Center a few blocks away from New Life on Third Street, and I began sitting on a black zafu three times a week.

The sitting room at the temple had redwood floors and low, circular cushions arranged in five rows. At one end of the room an altar covered with candles and bowls of water and stone figurines, and hanging above on the wall, a woven image of the Buddha. To the left of the altar, a large metal bowl. When the sitting began, the leader tapped the bowl with a small mallet. It made the

slightest of sounds, a tiny ping that rang through the room in slow, undulating waves.

What Lao Tzu says of the Tao may be said of meditation. Anything one says or writes in an effort to define it is not true meditation.

Just imagine you are sitting along the banks of a placid river. The air is warm around you and you hear nothing but the burbling water and the wind in the trees. As you look at the river flow by, you begin to notice leaves and sticks and mosquitoes skating across the surface. You begin to see a little upriver, and you can anticipate these things arriving, and follow them as they pass and finally disappear downriver. These passing things are your thoughts. And it is a commonplace to make such an elaborate observation, but the mere recounting is part of the experience sometimes. So I learned to sit and watch my thoughts come and go. To see how the shadows fell from the eucalyptus tree in front of New Life. To observe Freddie beg for another cigarette. To wonder if Wedd was gonna come over where I sat with my trumpet and jam the blues? To wonder if I was truly sober today? How sober was I? Would I ever graduate from New Life? The questioning chipping like an ax into each moment. Each thought filling my soul with color —the green of envy, red anger, purple passion--they all arrived and they all left me. I could be still in the center of my anxious being. I could be part of this world but not of this world. With each extra breath, I knew that the drugs were leaving me, that my dislocation--my arm, the old reality I shucked off on that Oberlin night—was like a leaf on the stream, and I was on a vessel head-

ing upstream to the source. If I kept my eyes open I could float on the upcurrent. I would be ready.

Then Naima came back into my life, and I fell in love with the sound of her voice. Someday, I hoped, I would look into her sweet brown eyes.

Long, long conversations talking on the pay phone in the New Life hall while the other mutts slid by me muttering gnomic twelve-step slogans to themselves. Damian reminding me that my twenty minutes were up, that I had chores to do, that I was going to get wall time if I didn't hang up the goddamn phone.

"Baby, when you comin' out here? How long are you gonna stay in Kansas?"

"Oh, please. Kansas ain't that bad."

"Yeah, but we got something good here."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Love."

"Oooh. Don't say that. You don't know how it is for a black woman to hear a white man tell her that. How can I trust you?"

"I don't lie. I am truth."

"Whatever. You sound like every other guy."

"Well, I'm reborn. Lester is my savior!"

"Lester? He sounds like a typical black parent. Y'all just needed a swift kick in the ass."

"Baby, drugs did that."

"Drugs? You didn't do no drugs. You smoked a little pot. That ain't doing drugs."

"Well, I'm here for a reason. It's not for me to question why—"

"Yeah, it's for you cry, cry, cry. Men. Y'all can't handle nothing. Try pushing a bowling ball out your pee-hole."

"I just did that the other day."

"Whatever," she said, laughing.

"Isaac," Damian yelled from the other room, "you gotta get off the phone. It's been twenty minutes, man." His voice had a nasal twang, a strange counterpoint to his tough-guy attitude, his sweat pants and wife-beater shirt.

"Yeah, hold on," I told him, putting my hand over the receiver. "Naima, the phone police are tellin' me I gotta get off."

"Well, I guess you gotta go then."

"I guess. I gotta lot of reading to do for school."

"Poor kid."

"Yeah. Well, you know I can't wait till you move back to L.A."

"Isaac," Damian sneered, "today, man."

"Yeah, yeah," I told him. "Well, I guess this is it," I told Naima.

"I guess this is it."

"Okay."

"Buh-bye."

32.

Love-uh-uh-uh-er-er!

Weeks passed. Punctuated with groups, peppered with schoolwork, sprinkled with twelve-step meetings.

Meditation gave me practice at being aware; Naima sparked so much more. But I also became almost too aware of my desires, the turn of emotion from anger to understanding, resentment to resolution. There were the frustrations with Damian, who slept in the lower bunk bed opposite mine, and sneered at my every appearance. I was snubbed by the jazz band at school. My father showed up at a New Life Family group and denied any responsibility for my drug addiction. I sat in the garage after the group, gripping a rake, my mind furious with resentment. My father walked to the edge of the garage, peered inside, and walked away.

I got so frustrated with the strictures of New Life rules and curfews and chores and seven hour meetings that I stole sixty dollars from Damian, took the bus to Tokyo Massage, and paid some poor, pretty young girl to jerk me off.

I guess I hadn't reached Nirvana yet. Though meditation calmed me, it was a temporary calm. Though Naima made time expand until it seemed like there was only a string of present moments stretched like a band of gold around our conversations, anxiety returned again.

And to think I began to believe that orgasm was the only relief from anxiety. That I began to complain at meetings that I had this problem, that I needed

to be touched, that I needed to come or I feared the worst. And the fear took different shapes. Jumping from the roof of the Beverly Center. Stepping in front of an MTA bus as it sped down Wilshire towards the Westside.

Speaking with Naima on the pay phone in the hall became a few moments of bliss in a hailstorm of desire. And as I began to catch her pet phrases, anticipate the easy confidence of her laughter, she became my pole star, and I set my compass by her flickering light.

"Hey baby, whatcha' doin'?" I asked.

"Nothin'."

"Nothing can come from nothing."

"I know. But I don't care. Ain't nothin' to do out here anyway."

"That's why you've got to move back to Los Angeles, where things are happening every night."

"Oh yeah, right. There ain't nothin' goin' on in L.A. What are you doin' that's so great?"

"Going to meetings, sober dances--"

"Sober dances? So you're seeing lots of girls?"

"No. I took a vow of celibacy."

"Celibacy? Why? Are you joining a monastery?"

"Sort of. I'm attempting to work the Program for my sexual addictions."

"Sexual addictions? You mean you like sex?"

"Well, yes. But I've been--I don't know how to say this--it's so embarrassing."

I was silent for a moment, feeling my heart pound in my chest, afraid because I didn't know if what I was about to say would alienate my only friend. I was nearly whispering when I said, "Naima, I paid for sex." My throat, my whole chest seemed to empty, and my mouth was dry as I moved my tongue and leaned my head into the wall. "I don't know why I did it. I just ended up there. I didn't even want to go. But then I had a little extra money, and I got the urge, and then I was on the table, and I had come and I felt, I felt--"

"You felt shame, Isaac. You need to think about why you would put that on yourself. Why don't you like yourself?"

I turned and slid down the wall, sitting in a dip in the warped hardwood floor, saying "I don't know, I don't know. I mean, I would like to blame it all on my parents, they were—"

"You know that's bullshit. Your parents did all they could. They provided. They did they job."

"I am learning. I am learning a lot from the steps."

"Well, that's good. But don't believe everything you hear. You know, some people might say AA is a cult."

"It's a good cult. I have a lot more clarity than I ever did before."

"Okay, Clarence."

I took a deep breath, the inhalation calming me, the humor settling my nerves. I wanted to tell her more, explain in great detail why I would risk arrest and disease, why I would spend money I couldn't afford. I wanted so badly to let her know that it wasn't what I wanted for myself. I wanted better. I wanted

to feel whole. I wanted to feel loved and she made me feel loved. She always made me feel loved.

"You know I've been thinking about you a lot," I said.

"Uh-oh. Here it comes."

"Yeah, and I have a song that reminds me of you."

"Uh-uh. That is cheesy, man."

"It's strange but everytime I hear Marvin Gaye's "Distant Lover," I think of you. They play that song on the radio all the time over here. It goes, "Distant loverrrrrrrrr, loverrrrrrrr, love-uh-uh-errrrrr."

"Oh, lord! Please stop the madness!"

"Love-uh-uh-uh-uh-err-err."

"Wooooo! You gonna break the phone."

"Awww babe. Think about me some time. Say a prayer for me—"

"You need way more than a prayer with that voice."

"Isaac!" Damian yelled from a couch in the front room. "Keep it down, man. Your time is almost up anyway. Twenty minutes, man. Look at the clock. I got to make a call."

"Aw, c'mon! It hasn't been that long."

"Isaac, I'm timing you on my wristwatch right now."

"Naima," I said, annoyed.

"Yeah? You gettin' busted by the phone po-pos again?"

"Yeah," I told her, smiling against the worn black receiver.

"Poor baby."

"I need somebody to rub my chest and tell me its all gonna be all right."

"Well, things change."

33.

Dear Dimwatt

Twenty minutes a day on the phone wasn't enough for me. So when my phone time ran out, I put pen to paper and wrote Naima letters. Page after handwritten page filled with detailed descriptions of my days, questions about love, questions about interracial dating. It felt like I was disturbing some cultural law. I mean, it was still illegal for blacks and whites to marry in Alabama. And Naima told me about one of her friends who had been lynched in a little country town in Kansas for winking at a white woman.

Dear Naima,

Sorry I had to hang up last night. You know how it is here. Everybody fighting for scraps. Last week I got forty minutes of "wall time" because Mike said I drank his apple juice. Forty minutes! Standing with my nose touching the dusty wall, three other house members doing the same thing, and some other guy who, because he's been here a little while longer, sitting in an easy chair eating boston baked beans, and making sure we don't talk or smile or scratch our asses or nothing.

At least I didn't get words. When I first got here, one time, I stole a three-prong plug adapter from Rexall's.

I don't remember how I got caught, but somehow Lester found out. He made me walk back up La Cienaga and return it. Imagine saying, "Excuse me, but I stole this plug. I am trying to stay sober from drugs and alcohol and I live at a recovery house, and the guy who runs the place made me take this back. So I apologize for stealing it and would like to make amends."

When I got back to the house, Lester said returning what I had stolen wasn't enough. I needed to really think about what I had done. So he gave me five thousand words and a topic: "How does stealing a $3.46 plug help keep me sober?" I filled up fifteen pages of notebook paper, front and back. Five thousand words wasn't too bad, though. Everyone gets words all the time. Everyone's supposed to pull each other's covers. Basically that means we tell on each other. Five hundred words for being a minute late to dinner. Five hundred words for failing to make your bed with military crispness. Usually we get an option of words or wall time. I usually opt for words. But if Lester notices you prefer one kind of punishment, he'll give you the one you hate just to see how much shit you can take. If you do something really terrible, like pull a Freddie and steal everyone's money, hire a cabby, hook up with three

East Hollywood hookers, and smoke crack till your balls turn bright green, well, then you get fifty thousand words. The all-time highest punishment was the time this guy named Mike L. brought a bag of weed into the house and smoked out everyone in his room. He got two hundred thousand words. Now, that's a lot of writing. Mike filled up fifty, maybe sixty legal pads, front and back. I asked him afterwards what he wrote, and he said, "I wrote a novel called, 'I will not smoke pot.' Then my hand fell off, man. I couldn't light a bowl if I wanted to."

You know that shit is scary!

Write back soon.

Love,

Dr. Clarence McKilljoy

Dear Dr. Coo-Coo,

You should write that novel.

Things here are ok. My mom is acting crazy, which is normal. The police just came by our house, I don't know why. Kansas is boring. I wish I was in L.A. with you. I'm waiting for the right moment to leave. I'm done with school, so there's nothing to keep me here.

My ex got sent to jail in Kansas City. He calls me collect, and I had to change the phone number cause the charges were running up. Anyway, I got into a fight with my mom over that and maybe that's why the po-pos came out. You know how we fight.

So, what are you doing right now? Why?

I need to ask you a question. Do you think you can deal with an interracial relationship? Don't you think it will be kind of hard? Can you handle it?

Love,

Naima

Dear Ms. Brown,

No way, I'm not afraid of being in an interracial relationship. I don't think it will be that hard.

What kind of love do we have? That one night we spent together last year was magical. I always admired you. You're so … truthful. You say what you feel. You don't try and act differently to please anyone. You're voice is like Billie Holiday's music in my ears. You just know she's looked life straight in the eye. You are a rainbow, bright with life, each day showering the world with golden light.

Will you shower me with golden light?

Dankle McLightbulb

Dear Dimwatt,

You crazy. I don't know about no golden light. I think maybe you hit your head.

34.

Death Wish. Then Escape.

A few days later, I took the Blue Bus to see a counselor recommended by Lester. The counselor was taking my history and making some evaluations for possible therapy. It was our third meeting, and I was beginning to feel some trust for him.

The Blue Bus was filled. That morning, Damian had insulted me again, saying, "You a little punk ass bitch, Isaac. All that reading you doin', it don't make you any betta than me. Get the fuck out my face."

I didn't respond. Just put my things in my backpack and left. But I seethed with rage. Damian slept in the lower part of the bunk opposite me. He reminded me of Egghead, pressing his jeans to a crisp, wearing white Adidas with fat red laces, talking in the tone and bluster of what he thought was the black American vernacular.

On the bus, I found a seat, still fuming. The truth is, I was thinking about killing him, strangling him in the night, anything to get him out of my life. The thoughts became overwhelming, a deafening clamor, and I felt a growing, guilty anxiety. The man across the aisle glanced at me. *He knows*, I thought. *He knows what I'm thinking*. Suddenly, the woman sitting next to me grazed my elbow with her purse. She knows too. They were all looking at me. They all knew what I was thinking. I had to get off. To get away. My stop arrived, and I hurried off, looking behind my back in fear. I was jittery. It was all I could do to walk to the clinic. When I got there, I told my counselor everything.

When I got back to New Life later that day, Leroy saw me and said, "Hey now, Isaac. Lester wants to see you."

I climbed the stairs to the second floor and found Lester in the office. He was on the phone, using all his powers of persuasion. "Look, Jerry. You can have your money back. I don't care. The Miracle Mercury Cure has a track record that speaks for itself, buddy. The ancients used mercury to live hundreds of years. Why not you and your friends as well? Don't you want to live forever?" Lester saw me, and said, "Jerry, Jerry. Listen. I gotta call you back." He hung up and swiveled his chair around. "Isaac," he said, giving me a strange smile, "Come sit down. How ya' been?"

I sat on the cracked, black leather bench underneath the whiteboard lined in orange and brown marker with the names of each house member, their sobriety date, the step they were working on, and their status in the house. I had been there six months: I had full status. I had a car. I could be responsible for other, less credentialed house members, and be like Dennis, who had taped an elaborate sign to his steering wheel that announced in big black block letters, DO NOT DEVIATE FROM THE PLAN, to remind the newly arrived New Lifers of one of Lester's mottos.

"Isaac." Lester waved his hand in front of my face. "Isaac. Hello, are you in there?"

I smiled peacefully and said, "Yes."

"Well, that's not what I heard. I hear you've been isolating a lot. Reading your books. Missing meetings."

My calm started to leave me, my stomach suddenly a prickly field of anxiety.

Lester stubbed out his cigarette. "That's not all," he said, "I heard you told your doctor that you wanted to kill Damian."

"How do you know that?" I cried.

"Isaac, when you tell your doctor you want to hurt somebody, they gotta do something. It's called the Tarasoff Law. That means your doctor has to tell us, and we have to tell Damian. Anyway, he isn't happy about it. And frankly, I'm not sure what to do."

I stared at the ground, humiliated.

"Well, tonight is group. We'll talk about it after dinner."

The cook that week was Freddie, the three-hundred pound Iranian crackhead who I will always remember wearing a long green dress as one of his acts of surrender, atonement for a crack run financed by stealing all the house member's money from the safe in the office. Somehow Lester convinced a merciful judge to send him back to New Life in lieu of jail. Freddie was a world-class cook, a former chef at Le Dome and the Hyatt Regency. A good man to have around the house, though I wasn't completely thrilled to actually observe him cook. Like most morbidly obese people, Freddie sweated in fumy abundance. The kitchen was next to the back door and the house had no air-conditioning, so the door stayed open. That night, Freddie stood over a pot of boiling water and a smaller vat of baked beans. He wore a yellow bandanna to soak up the rivulets of perspiration that slid down his skull. Still, sweat dripped from his eyebrows

and his ears in fast moving streams that sizzled when they hit the hot pot. Dinner was wieners and beans.

After eating, we all assembled in the living room, filling the ramshackle couches and chairs with our frazzled bodies, satiated with our meal, savoring our smokes.

Lester walked in on time that night. He wore the same blue jeans, cowboy boots, belt, denim shirt, and shit-eating grin as every other "group" night. He made two of the guys move so he could sit on the choicest couch, a brown leather loveseat picked up at a liquidation sale the week before. He tapped the end of his Marlboro box, extracted a cig. Clint pulled out his Zippo and gave Lester a light. He inhaled, blew out a huge, undulating smoke ring, smiling and laughing in a light, casual way, his eyes twinkling through the smoke.

"Well, well, well. Look at what we have here." He grinned and rubbed his hands together, his cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. He looked around the room and his eyes fell on me.

"Isaac, Isaac, Isaac. What a wicked web we weave when we practice to deceive." He laughed again, a low chuckle that seemed to include me in some deviltry I didn't know was possible.

Lester took another long drag on his cigarette and pointed at the wall. "Isaac, do you know what that is?" He pointed at the wall again and, a little louder, repeated his question, "Isaac, do you know what that is?"

I shrugged and said, "A wall?"

He chuckled. "Very funny," he said. "Yeah, you know, you're right. It is a wall."

I could hear some of the others chuckle. Robby bounced in his seat, repeating the words, "A wall, a wall, a wall."

"Ok, settle down," Lester warned. He gave the rest of the room a menacing glare, and everyone shut up. "Now, Isaac. We all know you're a quote intellectual type. You read books and all. That's fine. You go to college while the rest of us are trying to stay sober, to better our lives. But that doesn't make you any better than the piece of shit sitting next to you. Right?" He waited for me to answer, although I wasn't sure where this was leading, and said nothing. "The problem, Isaac, is that you're just the same as the rest of us." He looked over at Damian, who sat almost directly across the room from me on a dented, brown office chair, his slippered feet twisted around the chrome legs. "Damian," Lester said, "Why don't you go sit next to Isaac?"

Damian raised his eyebrows and sneered, "Why?"

"Look wiseguy, you want to do whatever it takes, right?"

Damian looked at the overhead light and said, "Whatever."

"Whatever!?" Lester shot back. "Whatever? Do you think we're just playing around here? Just having a little get-to-know you session?" Lester stood up and addressed the rest of the room, "What do you guys think of Damian's attitude?"

Mike raised his hand.

Damian kissed his teeth, and Lester pointed and said, "Mike, make it brief."

Mike was sitting next to Damian. He looked at him and then announced to the room, "I think this guy isn't even worth our time. He doesn't want a new life. He's in love with himself, with his alter-ego. He thinks he's some hard ass," here Mike's voice morphed into a whine, "but he's really just an itty bitty girl." Then he boomed, "All I have to say is"--everyone knew what he had to say, I had heard him say it a hundred times in the last few months, so everybody, including Damian, pointed and yelled half-heartedly--"*There's the fucking door*!"

Laughter shook the room. Mike's strawberry red face seemed to turn a few shades redder, and he sank back into the couch with a grunt. Damian just shook his head slowly back and forth, tapping the ground with his foot.

Lester asked two of the guys to get up, and he placed their chairs in the middle of the room on the hardwood floor facing each other.

"Ok," he said, "Damian, Isaac. Front and center. Each of you, take a seat."

I got up and sat in one of the thin wooden chairs and Damian reluctantly did the same, sitting in the other chair three feet away.

"Now," Lester said, "Look what we have here: Two peas in a pod." Lester stubbed out his cigarette and passed the ashtray on to Clint. "Damian, I want you to look at Isaac. Really look at him. What do you see?" Damian sneered and Lester shouted, "Hey, you're gonna do this little game right, or you can go pack

your shit right now! Clint, what was this guy doing before he showed up at our door step?"

"Damian?" Clint asked rhetorically, his voice an impossible mixture of disgust and concern. "He was sucking faggot's feet in West Hollywood for heroin money."

The room fell out, everyone laughing like they'd never heard anything so funny; Freddie, in a slithering roll of fat, falling on the floor in laughter, knocking over the ashtray, sending ashes in a shifting cloud across the room; everyone standing up and waving their arms until the soot settled.

I looked at Damian. His mouth hung open as if he wanted to laugh at Freddie, maybe even laugh at himself. But he held back and stared at me. Amidst the din of New Life jocularity, I looked back at him and felt no recognition.

In the midst of the ruckus, Charlie suddenly interjected, "I don't think using the word 'faggot' is very appropriate."

Everyone howled even louder, Lester himself breaking into a wide grin and saying, "Oh, Charlie. You're in the right place."

When it quieted down, Damian, fidgeting in his chair, said, "So what. I ain't no saint. Newsflash people: everyone in here, including you, Lester, is a fuckin' knucklehead. So you can step off my feet. Yours ain't clean neither. *Sheeeit*."

Lester nodded and said, "That's true." He folded his hands across his chest, repositioned his boots on the floor, and, after a moment, continued, saying

again, "That's true." His voice moved into a more thoughtful register, moving away from the comic atmosphere that had begun this sober pow-wow. He said, "The program teaches us we only have today. But the thing I'm worrying about, Damian, is you have about 100 days. I have twenty years clean and sober. Who's advice are you gonna trust?"

Leroy raised his hand, and Lester gave him the floor. His thick tongue darted out of his toothless mouth and licked his bottom lip. "Well, this may not be any of my business, but the way I see it--Isaac and Damian--they both could learn something from each other." He stopped and looked at Lester.

"Don't stop now, Leroy," Lester told him.

"Well, I'll tell you a little story. When I was a boy, I took a field trip with my sixth grade class to the beach. Somehow I got lost and ended up separated from the rest of the kids. I found myself on some strange street in a neighborhood full of white folks, no disrespect to y'all. When I grew up, where I grew up, white folks just meant trouble. I ran into this little white boy 'bout my age, all white as can be. He took me in his house and his mama called the school. I got home alright and I guess what I'm trying to say is you two can help each other, if you want to. You ain't too different to be of service to one another. I know if I put my faith in Jesus, and look to helpin' another, I might just stay off the pipe. Mm-hmm."

Everyone seemed to look at me. I hated being the center of attention and my thoughts seemed to recede, to fall back into some place prior to speech. I heard Damian say, "Well, I appreciate you sayin' all that, Leroy. I hate to admit

it, but I guess Isaac is a little like me in a way." His voice was very faint, and I started drifting, drifting away from that room. Sensing things unseen. *Shut your eyes and see.* Suddenly, I was gone, in my mind, fastened on some sort of raft, floating down a calm, undulating river, the sun bright and cheery, Huckleberry Finn and Jim and Naima by my side, feet in the water, fishing for goodness. I heard Damian's voice from far away say, "Shit, I guess he wants to be a part of the group like me. You know, part of something. Not alone." On the Mississippi, I kicked my feet, lost in the way the drops of water flitted across the glassy surface, the circles of impact spreading out, leaves bobbing up and down over the ripples like ships at sea. I heard Lester say, "Isaac, are you in there?" On the river, I put my arm around Naima and we laughed at the bats darting over our heads, at the cloud up above in the shape of a steaming train, at the way the world shook with pleasure. I heard Lester say, "Give him this." I felt metal against my hands. It was my trumpet. I put it to my lips and blew. Sound streamed out of me like sweet liquid, the music straight from my heart: safe with Naima beside the reeds along the river. I played and played and played, the melodies tapping softly against the hard surface of the air, and when I finally stopped, the room was quiet. When I opened my eyes. I was alone in the middle. Damian had gone back to his original spot. Lester was standing over me. "Isaac," he said, "you're gonna be all right. Go back to your seat, man."

35.

I Am Not Damian

The next day Lester transferred me to a ranch-style house just east of Crenshaw Boulevard in Torrance. I put all my clothes and books in two big black trash bags, loaded them into my car, and drove through the crowded freeways until I reached the other New Life. My new bedroom had four bunk-beds, and I was assigned the top bunk next to the window. I climbed up and sat cross-legged looking out into the sunlight. It seemed like everyone in the house was a teenager. The dining room was decorated like a fifties diner, with red leather booths, speckled linoleum floors, and a juke box with songs like "Institutionalized," the lyrics becoming a mantra in this New Life halfway house--*all I wanted was a Pepsi, and they wouldn't give it to me/stuck me in an institution, said it was the only solution/give me needed professional help to save me from the enemy, myself.* Outside, a garden of tomato and yellow squash and eggplant flourished in a small plot of dark loam. And just below my window, some overzealous New Lifer had made creative use of one of Lester's ethical touchstones, having scrawled in gothic black type --*RIP: The one who would not follow directions*--on the cardboard tombstone.

Three weeks later, Damian overdosed. A clerk found him in the stairwell behind Rexall's Drugs, the needle still in his neck.

I stopped calling Naima. Stopped writing her letters, thinking if I just focused on school and sobriety I would right my inner world, the anxiety would drain away.

One night, I got into bed and read *Othello* for class. But I soon fell asleep, barely finishing the first act. While I slept, I dreamt of Iago shouting *I am not who I am* to an auditorium full of empty seats.

The chronological distance between intoxication and sobriety became longer and longer. Though I felt the clarity that must flow from a brain less inebriated by the jangling chemistry of LSD and pot and booze, mental clarity only made my isolation more acute. If I was to find any inner strength, I would have to envision a new life that would revise my dreams. I needed a crutch, and I needed to see my family again.

Towards the end of my time at New Life, Lester granted me a week-long pass, and I traveled, for the first time since the divorce, to my mother's house in Sebastopol, in the Sonoma county countryside. She had bought a small place off of Bodega Highway, and, with her mother, taken up residence in the slightly zany, hippie aftershock of rural Northern California. Granma Elly was as flinty as ever, and when I arrived, she took one look at my face with its couple days of facial hair, scowled and said, "Oh, look at that bird's nest! Why would you do that?!"

My mother hugged me, pushing her head into my chest, pressing against me, holding me close with her arms wrapped around my torso for a few minutes,

just rocking. Then she straightened up, and tearful, said, "Isaac, you'll always be my baby." When she tried to cup my face with her hand, I pulled away.

She gave me a short tour of her modest ranch home. It was a glorified shot-gun affair, the long living room fronted on one side by a bank of sash windows that offered a view of rolling oak and apple tree hills, turkey vultures circling above in the cool thermals.

She had mounted a large lithographic copy of Diego Rivera's painting depicting a man with an enormous sack of calla lilies crouching before a woman. We sat under this depiction of romanticized labor, while my grandmother found her rocker next to an old, black stove.

"Isaac, I have missed you. We never talk anymore," said my mother.

"I know—"

My grandmother had been staring absent-mindedly out into the trees, when she turned and shouted, "So what do you know?" I didn't know what to tell her, my mind filled with a discomforting sense of failure. Before I could muster up a reply, my grandmother said, "You don't know anything, do you?"

"I guess not, grandma. Should I?"

"Sure," she said, nodding her head solemnly. "You're out in the world."

"Well, what do you know?" I replied, grinning and looking at my mother for support.

My mother narrowed her brows, pursed her lips and said, "Oh, she can't hear you. Mom," my mother yelled, the sound of her voice startling me and Elly, "Isaac asked, 'What do you know?!'"

"Oh, I don't know anything," Elly said, raising her hands to her face and then dropping them to her lap. She smiled at me and added, "I just sit in my rocker all day. That's all I do. Your mother, she's a workaholic. She thinks she knows everything. Ask her about the Pope and she has an opinion."

My mother smoothed a crease in her right pantleg. I suddenly noticed the elegance of her clothes. She wore salmon slacks, a green velvet blouse, and a stunning amber and jade necklace. "I've been working a lot," she said. "But I always think of you. Ever since you went off to school in Ohio, we've been distant. But that can change, can't it?" She lowered her chin, and I thought she was going to cry. I saw that her lips were also painted, a soft pink that nearly matched her slacks.

She seemed so fragile, I put my arm around her and kissed her cheek. "Of course," I told her.

"I love you, Isaac," she whispered.

"Oh, for pete's sake!" my grandmother cried. "What's wrong with the remote? Oh Sarah, I can never figure this out!"

My mother stood and went over, saying roughly, "Here. Give it to me. Give it."

My grandmother, her mouth agape, said, "What? I can't hear you?"

My mother snatched at the remote in my grandmother's long, bony hands. "Give it to me!" she yelled. Finally, she grabbed the remote and said, "Look! I've showed you this a thousand times. You have to push this red button and then the black button. See?" The television clicked, a sheet of white noise

buzzed across the black screen, and the picture resolved into footage from a natural disaster in Tanzania. My grandmother studied the screen, and my mother turned to me and said, "Isaac, I will be right back." She ran her fingers through her brown hair and then she walked off towards her bedroom at the other end of the long, narrow house.

My grandmother looked over at me and said, "Your mother is very angry."

"Why?"

"'Y' is a crooked letter," she replied, letting out one short laugh. "Why don't you ever call?"

"'Y' is a crooked phonecall," I shot back, feeling more confident, actually enjoying myself.

"Oh," she sighed, turning her head back toward the news. After a few moments she said, "Those poor people in Africa. All we need is more black babies in the world."

"What?" I said, shocked.

But she didn't hear my dismay, adding, "Oh, the world is going to hell in a hand-basket."

My mother returned from her bedroom, her face brightened with a swipe of burgundy lipstick, and said, "Isaac. I want you to come see my friends tonight. To come to a party. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No. Well, what kind of party?"

"Just a small one."

"Will there be any drinking?"

"Just wine, that's all. You don't have to drink if you don't want to."

Her friends' house was in Bodega, the town where Hitchcock filmed *Birds*, the gothic spire of the church visible from the Klein's dining room.

By the end of the salad course, Bill Debacci was drunk and discoursing on Hitler as art, a concept at which his wife paled.

I leaned against the soft, woolen fabric of my grandmother's jacket and said, "Grandma, hi."

"What do you want?" she said querulously, her slender, pink lips curved in a mixture of what I hoped was an enlightened combination of disgust and delight. I began to feel a new respect for her, and even for my mom and her ridiculous friends. They had lasted. They imagined they had made it through a few rites of passage. "Oh," my grandmother sighed, pulling the worn ends of her jacket around her body.

"Grandma," I said as the other side of the table erupted into a spate of conjecture about the relationship between beauty and anti-Semitism, "What were your parents like?"

"What?" she said, sighing, and shaking her head. "I can't hear you!"

I wondered if she was feigning deafness for a moment. But I repeated my question anyway, and she said, her voice a tremulous sigh that seemed to alternate between some long-lasting physical pain and a tone even more insistently troubling, "Oh, they should never have had children."

36.

Taglines, Cliches, and Depth

One day during my last few weeks at school, I saw a flyer on a bulletin board outside the English Department office. A literary journal was looking for editors, people to read short stories. I called the number and was invited for an interview at a busy ad agency just west of Paramount Studios. The journal, *Palette*, was funded by a young, beautifully shy woman named Summer Selwyn. She was a partner at the agency she had founded with her husband. The agency specialized in artwork for marketing mostly blockbuster Hollywood movies. She had made a small fortune over the previous few years, and, a brokenhearted artist cashing in her M.F.A. in the Fine Arts for a lucrative half-art, she took a few thousand dollars, hired a *New Yorker* cartoonist to create stunning cover images, and began publishing a journal every few months. After a short conversation, she gave me a stack of stories and told me to go home, read 'em, and then write a short synopsis indicating why or why not *Palette* should publish their work.

A few months later, unemployed, and quickly sinking in debt, I was bringing back another stack of stories, my twenty-five word gloss penciled neatly on the top of the title page, when Summer asked how I was doing, and I complained about how rough post-college life had become. She asked if I would be willing to write a tagline exploration for one of the movie projects.

To create a tagline, a writer reads a hundred-twenty page script, then boils the whole story down to ten words.

The agency usually hired a half-dozen people, hoping out of a hundred and fifty clichés, there might be one flabby loaf of dough coated with the glaze of originality. My first assignment was to contribute to the screen adaptation of Henry James's first novel, *Washington Square*. I had recently studied James in a seminar, and I cannot underestimate the pride I suddenly felt at putting my education to some good, practical use, though my contribution failed to make the final cut. However, my second assignment, working on the Howard Stern's soon-to-be-released blockbuster, *Private Parts*, went better. I was lucky, and my copy was chosen. My language would affix all advertising for the theatrical release, and each and every mass-produced work of art/unit rising out of the smithy that was the story of Howard Stern and his *Private Parts*—the *VHS*, the DVD, the CD, the RSVP to Mr. Stern's BYOB PARTY, and the cover of the *Exclusive Private Parts Diorama To Mr. Stern's Private Parts* coloring book. Everything about this heroic American figure summed up in eleven words that had flowed from the sweet, inebriate stream of my pen; the sweet syntax, the comic chain of nouns and verbs and modifiers that encapsulated absolutely nothing about Mr. Stern, to whom I had paid little attention, but for whom I crafted perhaps the epitaph of my very own life:

Never before has a man done so much with so little.

Then for the first time in what seemed like ages, I felt the taste of self-esteem; I could do something well. Perhaps there was a seat for me in the room of life. Even if it was a minor grommet in the bankrolling of a rich mouthy disc jockey who didn't need the money. But Los Angeles--the whole nation!--was

covered with my writing! I saw every bus bench poster, every billboard, every newspaper and magazine and soundtrack and (soon after) video cover with my words in big round red letters to the right of the ridiculous image of Mr. Stern, who stood with his naked body fantastically airbrushed, the Empire State Building rising up from his feet, directly in front of his crotch, over his photo-shop-enhanced muscle-bound chest, to end with the tip of the hippodrome lance just below his chin, his curly locks framing a proud face, if I could read air-brushed human nature at all, clearly thinking, "Fuck you lookin' at?! Ba-ba-booie!!"

From then on, those eleven words would hang in the portfolio of my mind as a measure of my potential and the very real possibility that behind the black leather covers that housed this absurd picture anyone could find revealed my deepest fear, my own private tagline.

Never before has a man done so much with so little.

ii.

A Solution We Can Feel

In the sunset of our dissolution,
everything is illuminated by the aura
of nostalgia, even the guillotine.
--Milan Kundera,
The Incredible Lightness of Being

Screentest #2

The Myth of Sam and Ebony

An Indie Interlude

4. INT.--CAVE--LIGHTING AS IN A MOVIE THEATER

There is a meticulously crafted colored shape projected onto the wall above a row of chairs. It is in the shape of a ROUND WOMAN. She is twisting, dancing—caught in the rock's own rhythm--her torso limned in a wide black brush-stroke, her hair a streaking comet trail of red. Men in varying states of torpor and intoxication lean into one another with their heavy arms, their eyes locked on the shape above them on the wall. Our HERO pokes his head in from behind a purple curtain.

HERO

I do not like my name
or this cave. But I am
so tired of looking at the wall.
I crave the real thing. Oh, how
I want to touch and be
touched by this woman,
the real woman beyond
these flickers on the wall.

A blind HERMAPHRODITE wearing black sunglasses and a long, tie-dye toga moonwalks into the room. Her voice is the texture of sandpaper. She carries a yellow leather bag over her shoulder and reaches into it, pulling out a long papyrus scroll held together with a red velvet string. As she throws it to the ground, a phalanx of flying green ants sweeps seven inches above the floor, catches the string, and carries it into the glare of the streaming image where the SPECTATORS smash the ants into the wall on which the image of the ROUND WOMAN glows, pull their pants down, and ejaculate wildly.

SPECTATORS

More! More! More!

The HERMAPHRODITE takes our HERO by the hand and leads him into a brilliant room. Though they are underground, there is a window with a long tube. At the end, we see a windmill and a green giant. The giant is blowing into the windmill. We see a thousand clocks—of all types: glockenspiels, bell towers, obelisks, moonshine—click in waltz-time around the giant's tongue as his breath moves the four-winged mill, the clocks seem to dance. They reach a

crescendo of motion. And then they disappear. We see that the windmills are sitting on saucers of Delft blue china.

The HERMAPHRODITE whispers into the HERO'S ear. We see her lips move, and as she speaks, we see a string of lights stretching across a row of books. The lights flicker, alternating blue and red, dissolving into a firework firefall that settles into the form of a bridge.

We do not hear what the HEMAPHRODITE whispers.

FADE TO GRAY.

38.

Love?

When I graduated from New Life, I moved from Torrance to Hollywood, found work at a telephone bank through a temp agency, and took a hundred dollars to Ross on Sunset and La Brea, where I purchased some slacks and a few button-down shirts.

Still, when I came home to my apartment at night, I was lonely. Naima had moved back to L.A., and I thought if I was lucky, she might want to see me.

But sometimes the stars don't align.

When I phoned her, she just said, "No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't trust you. You talked a good game on the phone, in your letters, but then you just disappeared. I haven't heard from you in months. Why should I waste my time?"

I felt a hardness in my throat, and I said, "Naima, I just miss talking with you, is all. That's the only reason I called."

"Well, we'll see. Call me tomorrow."

I hung up the phone and lay on my bed, looking up at the ceiling. The sounds of Hollywood filtered through the windows. I turned on the small lamp on the floor next to my mattress. I had started keeping a journal—a zebra-covered Mead Composition Book purchased for fifty-nine cents at the drug-store—and I opened it up. I thought about something I had heard in the meeting

earlier that day, that God doesn't have to be some bearded guy in the sky, or some punishing force. The speaker wore an old green Army flak jacket and jeans. He had a five-o'clock shadow and his voice was gruff as he said, "You know, the whole concept isn't that difficult. If you're struggling to understand what we're saying, here's what we're telling you: you need to find God to stay sober, but that God can be a God of your own understanding. Look, this is how I see it today. I have a phone. I know I need to plug the phone into the wall. I know I need power. But I don't know how that power works. All I know is that I need the phone. Now, when I first came in, I didn't want to believe. Why believe in a power greater than myself? But now I know--." He paused to take a swig of his coffee, the brown flow of Yuban sloshing from the white Styrofoam cup into the stubbleheavy wattle of his neck. He coughed, pulled a blue handkerchief from his pants pocket, wiped his thin pink lips, and continued, some in the room slumping further into their chairs and sighing. I lowered my head, imagining what my insides would look like if they looked like a room. Would they look like New Life? Would there be a tombstone? Would Wedd be blowing blues arpeggios with his hot, wet F# harmonica? Would Naima be laughing into the air, her laughter tapping the air like notes on the dense keyboard of my imagination? The man put his handkerchief back in his pocket with deliberate slowness, and continued his speech, his voice now spiked with a tinge of regret, "With that attitude I might as well say, 'Why believe in the phone? I don't understand how it works, so, fuck it, I won't use it.' No, no!" he said shaking his head, "I'd be a fool not to use the phone, unless I wanted to be very, very lonely." He

sat back, his eyes fluttering. This tough guy, a real softie. "I don't want to be lonely. That's what I was doing getting high all those years. Exploring my navel. I don't need to do that anymore. Today, I'm answering the phone." I wrote this all down in my journal. I closed it, turned off the lamp, and lay back on the mattress.

The next day, I called Naima again.

"Uh-oh. Two days in a row," she said, "you're gettin' regular."

"Yes, yes." I stymied the urge to be flip and lay back on my mattress in my slacks, untying my shoes, holding the phone against my neck with all the torque and force desire could create. I managed to grunt, "I seem to be getting the old-new me back in order."

"You're working for the new world order?"

"No!" My feet were now directly above my head and the phone had jammed into my neck in such a way that it began to cramp. "Ow! Ow!"

"What's goin' on, big head?"

"Hold on," I said. I put the phone down and straightened my neck out, holding it steady until the spasm had passed.

"Are you gonna' live?" Naima asked.

"No," I told her.

I finally got my shoes off and placed them neatly against the wall.

A few moments passed in silence. Finally, she asked me, "Are you still thinking about my question?"

"Yeah," I said. I rubbed my ankles, sore from walking down Hollywood Boulevard from my job on Vine. The streets were gray and unpopulated to the east. Burger stands and souvenir shops selling plastic Oscars and cheap t-shirts—"Hollywood" spelled out in rhinestone glitz across the front--competed with boarded up movie palaces. Runaways leaned against graffitied buildings, studded black collars around their necks, asking for handouts. I gave two quarters to a woman with a spider web tattoo around her eye. She said, "God bless you." She squatted on a box in front of a shoe store; through the window, a phalanx of four-inch leapard and leather boots staked their appeal on the throng of nubiles who'd set out to make their celebrity only to end up hustling their valentine hips along the dirty blocks that ringed the studios. The stars along the Walk of Fame were being polished by a crippled, legless man. He posed above the glittering brass plate of Edgar Rice Burroughs for a group of German tourists. I was grateful I wasn't hustling for drugs and money; happy to be relieved of the anxiety about passing a drug test for my new job, or being pulled over by the cops, or waking up in my own vomit. It had been more than a year since I tore up my father's house. I hadn't spoken with Naima since I first entered New Life, after I tried to hang myself. But I was desperate, and it was desperation that made me brave when I said, "Naima, I know I'm not quite worthy, but why don't you let me bake you some bread?"

"Bread?" she asked. "Okay. What kind?"

"I have a secret recipe," I lied. After a moment of silence, I couldn't contain my joy and yelled, "Yes! You won't regret this decision."

"You are such a nerd," she told me.

"You don't want my bread?"

"Hey, like my Uncle Al always said, 'Those that spread the bread, shall eat.' I'll take a sample, peanut head."

Naima and her mom lived in an old brick building just west of downtown and Vermont. After Naima let me in, she re-introduced me to her mother, Maude. Maude sat on the living room couch in a green robe watching the TV news.

"Hi. Nice to see you again," she told me.

She saw that I had a bag of supplies: flour, baking powder, a recipe book. She asked me what I was making.

I told her the name of the one I selected, not realizing what I was saying until after I began, the words tumbling out, "The recipe is for Rich White Bread."

"Uh-huh. Funny muthafucka. Rich. Sssss!" She picked up her thin glass—filled with a maroon-colored liquid--and I watched her as she picked out an ice cube. Her cheeks became concave, and I stood in silence, the ingredients in the bag suddenly felt like poison.

"Isaac, come over here," Naima called from her room.

The apartment was spacious, shaped like a long "L" with Naima's room at the foot of the "L", at the end of the long hallway.

Naima leaned against the door jamb, reaching out for my hands, and pulled me into an octagonal bedroom with a large bay window. It was filled

with two mattresses pushed against each other, a small wooden dresser, and an avalanche of clothes that poured like lava out of a small closet.

She sat me on the bed and said, "Don't listen to her. She's drunk."

"She thinks I'm a rich white guy."

"You are. Get over it." She smiled, shrugging her shoulders like she had just announced the most obvious thing in the world.

"What?" I asked, both hurt and laced with the lineaments of guilt.

"Just that I know, my mom knows, everybody except you knows that you can afford to bring over ingredients for bread. Not everybody can do that. It's appreciated, but the name of the recipe, Isaac. I mean, it isn't very subtle."

"You mean I should have lied?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling.

I saw that she had a stack of textbooks by the bed. "What classes are you taking?" I asked.

She pursed her lips and swung her head away, the motion quick and jaunty. "Well, I was in school but--" She raised her hands, palms up, and shrugged, saying, "I guess I wasn't quite ready."

"Really? Why?"

"To be honest, I just didn't have the money. I'm goin' back though."

"I'm sure you'll finish up."

"Yeah, I will," she said, determined.

"You still want to be a scientist?"

"That's the goal."

"What do you want to study?

"Hearts."

"You want to be a heart surgeon?"

"No, I don't want to cut up living people. I want to cut up dead people and

see how to design little microscopic robots to fix damaged valves."

"Yikes," I said, "that's ambitious."

She stood up and looked out the window. A prism hung from a piece of fishing wire, slowly twisting. She blew on it and said, "Well, I might as well shoot for the moon. Then if I end up working at MacDonald's at least I'll know I tried."

"McDonald's?"

"What's wrong with MacDonald's?" she asked, "I've worked there before. My cousin works there right now."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I've gone and said something stupid. Again. Forgive me."

She looked at me sharply. I thought she was about to cuss me out. But she just shook her head and said, "White people are really dumb sometimes. Where do y'all grow up? Planet Zepton?"

Any other time I would have switched into Captain Intergalactic mode, started going on about star dates and earthlings and the distance between Alpha Centauri and the Dog Star, but instead I stood up and put my hands on her shoulders. She grinned, but her eyes widened and her eyebrows rose in what I

imagined was fear. I came closer to her face, leaning my right eye into her soft cheek, fluttering my eyelashes against her soft skin, angel kissing.

She twisted away, crying, "Oooh, that tickles."

I reached out for her hands and she brought hers against mine. Her hands were a little cold, her skin soft and yielding.

I pulled her close to me again, lowering my head to kiss her.

Suddenly, she said, "Oh! No!" I saw her eyes glimmer and shuttle a few times between my eyes and lips. For a split second I thought she would kiss me, but instead she took my hand and led me out of the room, saying, "Let's go make some bread."

We cooked in the kitchen, Maude sticking her head in once to look around. When the loaf came out of the oven, warm and fragrant, Maude and Naima and I sat around the table, the bread steaming, and we ate.

"This ain't too bad," Maude offered, chewing on a thick slice. "Naw, ain't too bad at all. Naima, your friend can bake some bread."

"Thank you, Mrs. Brown," I politely replied.

"Call me Maude, I ain't married."

"Thank you, Maude."

"Uh-huh. Oh, yeah. You can bake a bread."

Naima could barely contain her laughter, finally releasing it as she walked me to the bus station, yelling, "Oh, damn! You're fucked now. You better be over here or my mama's gonna kick your little butt."

"I don't mind. That was my whole scheme from the beginning. Now, you won't be able to get rid of me."

I poked at her ribs with my fingers, getting her to giggle, to cackle, to scream, "Stop!!"

We leaned into the window of a Korean Bar-b-q restaurant and I tried to kiss her, but she pushed me away. I made a pass at her ear, but she really screamed then, and when I saw the patrons in the restaurant turn, I stopped. A man came to the door and asked, "Is everything all right here, sir?"

"It's okay," I said, wondering why he asked me the question.

As we sat on the bus bench, she said, "Isaac, do you think I'm pretty?"

"Oh, boy. Do I ever. Can I compare you to a summer's day?"

"Yes," she said, batting her eyelashes. "But the bus is comin', Billy."

""Oh, thou art smart, but art thou wise?"

"Art thou an idiot?"

I kicked at the ground, momentarily unable to reply.

When the bus pulled up, I hugged her and found a seat in the back, waving, an ear-to-ear smile on my face. I could see her smile in return, and though the bus steadily built the distance between us, I felt a thread inside my chest knit a woven fabric that seemed to keep Naima close. Where there had been anxiety and loneliness, there was abruptly something else. Where there had been a slack, fraying rope around my neck braided with the tricky loops of fear and shame, this line now took the shape of what I only imagined was love.

39.

A Black Olive

Against My Cracked Pink Lips

That Friday, I took her to the movies.

As the trailers flickered on the screen above, I glanced at Naima's face and it was as if all the pleasures of my past life were revealed as lacking in some crucial element; her easy expressiveness seemed to make a mockery of my so-called communication skills. I took some English classes in college. I could write a tagline. So what? Naima's candor made the most ironic witticism seem like fool's gold. As the trailers rolled by, I watched her face closely, touched by the tenderness in the crease above her eyebrows, by the seeming absence of cynicism in her responses. An image of Jim Carrey in *Liar, Liar* made her laugh. A scene from *Love Jones* made her shake her head. She leaned into me, putting her hands around my right arm. I looked down at her face, and drew her close.

The featured movie began, a functional thriller. *The Rich Man's Wife*, with Halle Berry, seemed to play on our own private joke. Though the movie was full of dramatic violence and serious incident, we stifled our incessant laughter.

Afterwards, heading out of the theater, I saw a *Private Parts* poster.

"Come see my masterpiece," I told her, taking her hand in the lobby and leading the way to one of the framed, glossy posters announcing future releases.

"You wrote that?" she asked.

"Yes, I take full responsibility if it flops."

She nodded her head in approval, the corners of her mouth turned slightly downward, her eyebrows rising.

I stood with her to one side of a corridor leading out into the Beverly Center Mall. As I put my arm around her, I sensed other people's judgments. A fortysomething man in a powder-blue silk shirt, and a woman, perhaps his wife, in a long, mauve dress, both turned to stare. I returned the stare and they looked away. A group of teenagers ignored us completely. But another young couple, a man in a black leather jacket and tattered jeans, his date in a ruffled white blouse, seemed to scowl at me. Or was I imagining it?

Naima pulled me toward the door, but I resisted saying, "Well, what do you think of my writing skills?"

"It's sort of funny. In a clichéd way," she said, nonchalantly, seeming unimpressed, and pulled me into the tiered indoor promenade.

The mall was crowded, the variety of Angelenos—old matrons in wispy afghans, young ladies in tight jeans, middle-aged rockers in leather studded chokers—walked aimlessly, their faces bored and enthralled and distant. The shops seemed to glow with promise, with the varnish of success. We passed shoe stores and chocolatiers, toy and eyeglass shops. I walked alternately holding Naima's hand and letting go, still unsure.

I suggested we go somewhere else, so we went for a cup of coffee at a diner, Swingers, a few blocks away on Melrose Boulevard.

"Well, what now?"

"Who can say?" I replied. I paused, enjoying the moment, the warm booth against my legs and back. The diner was dark except for the kitchen and a small table candle. In the kitchen, overhead lights bathed the cooks, who moved through columns of steam, tall white toques like crowns on their head. The room was noisy, and I leaned across the table and whispered, "It feels really good in here."

"Why are you whispering," she said, a small grin growing on her face.

"I'm being romantic."

"Oh," she said, her voice now matching my volume. Her hands cupped the coffee, the steam curling through her fingers. She looked into it for a moment, her face bathed in the warmth pouring up from the cup. She leaned back, her eyes slowly lifting to meet mine.

Though I tried to suppress a smile, tried to shield my ridiculous happiness, I couldn't. And perhaps thinking that I found her demeanor comic, she said, "What? Is there a bug on my forehead?"

"No, you look beautiful."

"Thank you," she softly replied, looking down at her hands.

"I have dreamed of this for a very long time."

"Does reality live up to the dream?"

"I think I may still be dreaming."

"Are you saying I'm a mirage?"

"Perhaps." I felt the earlier anxiety in the mall drain away. The diner, the other Angelenos, didn't care who I dated, it seemed. I wasn't performing for

anyone but her, so I began to soar again. "Perhaps. Maybe we are all just characters in a daydream of a minor god?"

"Minor? You mean underage?"

"Or perhaps one less powerful than the gods with the big guns."

"Like the white people?" she teased.

"Yes! No! We whites do not aspire to godliness."

"That's for sure. You need to talk to some of your people, though. They be keepin' a brother down"

I reached across the table for her right hand, interlacing my fingers with hers.

"What did you think of the movie?" I asked.

"It was pretty typical."

"It didn't meet your standards?"

"Well, first of all," she said, raising one finger of her left hand, "she throws the guy off a balcony, then," she signaled with two fingers, "he falls through a car window, then," she raised three fingers, "she kicks him in the balls," she held up four fingers, and added, "then she stabs him in the eye with her high heel. All that after shooting him three times in the chest! I mean, damn!"

"It was a little melodramatic."

"Melodramatic? It was crap!"

"Now you've crossed the line. You've clearly had a bit too much to drink."

"I have," she said, grinning. "This coffee could kill a horse."

"Or a rich husband."

"It could kill a horse with wings."

"An angelic horse husband."

"A what?" she said, bursting into giggles.

"Never before has a horse done so much with so little?"

Her laughing slowed from a great surge of glee to a fine sputter, and finally a full stop. "Okay. That's not all that funny."

"It's not?"

"You like to talk about yourself, huh?"

I did not, I thought, bringing my chin against my chest.

"Don't get offended. It's not like I'm saying anything outrageous. And isn't that one of the main ideas of AA: to change how you act?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling chastised, "but usually I'm fairly perfect."

"Oh, ho! Perfect? Yeah, a perfect square."

"Shush up," I told her.

Her right hand still sat snugly interlaced with mine. I began to study her palm, thinking back to our first meeting at the Consulate all those years before. Despite the dark ambiance, the candle cast a flickering light on our table, a slender green taper wax-welded into a ceramic bowl. Our hands joined in the glow, not so dark as to be purple, not so light as to be gold.

"Isaac, do you really think you're ready for this?"

"Ready for what?"

"Us!?"

The candle light played across her face, dancing from her cheek to her chin to her lips. I didn't want to wade into this discussion. But she insisted, prodding me into a response, and I told her it wasn't a problem.

"No problem?" she replied, indignant. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened. I looked away, and she continued, her tone shifting into a sweeter register, "Well, I guess I'll be nice to you tonight. But you might just consider how people look at us."

"I know, I've sensed that. I've felt that way—"

"Yeah. That's gonna be an everyday thing. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about."

"It is a little uncomfortable." Even then, as I spoke, my gaze left its place of rest on Naima's eyes to sweep across the room. I wondered if this was what it was like to be black. To always feel like eyes were staring, judging, reacting to your presence. I wondered if it felt like paranoia. I didn't ask and paid the bill.

On the drive home, I let her choose the station. KMZT, the Mozart station.

"You like old white people's music?"

"I am not even going to answer that question," she said. I took my eyes off the road and glanced at her face silhouetted in the moonlight. "You know," she finally added, "I played the cello in high-school before we got evicted. I was in the Youth Philharmonic. Played *The Rite of Spring*."

"Beethoven?"

"Stravinsky, silly. Sheesh. All you know is jazz?"

"No. Yeah. Well. My folks didn't listen to much violin music. They liked amplification and blackness."

"Blackness? You mean they thought only black people had soul?"

"Maybe." An image arose in my mind of my father's record collection, the hundreds of covers—Miles Davis and Fats Navarro and Benny Carter—all the covers from the fifties and earlier without black faces on them. My mouth went dry, and I returned to her earlier question at the diner, my tongue the texture of something like vulnerability, "Naima, do you think we make a good match?"

She had been staring out the window, into the big trees of Hancock Park, the maples and sycamores tracing a crooked maze against the sky that spread from the bright horizon to the indigo zenith, pinpricked with stars. When she turned to answer, she pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt down and said, "I dunno. Let's just take it slow."

The worry was suddenly gone. As if her ambiguity was the highest affirmation, I did what came easiest for me. "Hey, slow is my middle name. I came in last place in the Slowest Olympics. I make slow look fast. I—"

She interrupted me as I began to move into high comic mode, "Oh, stop! Stop the madness!"

"I sped up and I still went backwards."

By the time I pulled up to the curb in front of her apartment, unless I was imagining things, a sweet friction had spread a warm net around us. I turned and savored the music, the dance of the violins making melody of the space be-

tween us. My mouth was no longer dry, and I could taste the soft sugar of desire on my tongue.

She turned in her seat and said, simply, "I had a very nice time tonight."

And then I moved forward and kissed her goodnight.

When I got home, I wrote her a prose poem and sent it Express Mail.

Naima. Naima. Naima. The sound of your name is a deep melody in my soul. A bright dazzle of dark light. A shining from within. The scent of joy in the smoggy Angeleno air. Your skin as soft and cool as mother's milk. Your k iss, a smooth black olive against my cracked pink lips.

A few days later I got a postcard, a picture of Tommy's Chili Dogs' wiener mobile on the cover. On the back, she had written: "Never before has a dog done so much with so little. Add the relish, please."

40.

The Blessing

When I told my father about Naima, his first response was "Hmmm. Why do you like her?"

"Do I need a reason, dad?"

"No," he immediately replied, pulling his heel up above his knee, rubbing it with his palm. "No."

He changed the subject and it didn't come up again.

But Naima pressed for more information. She asked again and again what my father really thought about our relationship. Wasn't he hiding something? She told me her family was skeptical. They asked her: "Do you know what you're doing?" "Is his penis small?" "Doesn't he smell like bologna?" "How does he take a shit with that flat, little butt?"

"I know my family's ridiculous," she said, "but at least they're asking questions. That's what's wrong with white suburbanites. You can't talk about anything uncomfortable. Everything gets swept under the rug as soon as conflict arises. The broomsticks rise up out of y'alls assholes and it's 'Good night, conversation.' Why is that, man?"

I didn't know how to answer these generalizations, but her observations made me uncomfortable.

So she continued, saying, "White people don't want to get to know us."

"Us?" I interrupted. "You're the spokesperson?"

"Man, us. Yeah, for you, white boy, I'm the spokesperson. How many other black people do you know as friends?"

"None," I admitted.

"Think about it. Why do you think the L.A. riots happened? Why do you think I went to the supermarket and got as much food as I could? Do you think we like to starve? Why do you think black people were pleased to see that O.J. got away with murder? Finally, a black man does what a white man has done a gazillion times."

"Does that make a black man exempt from murder? Is that justice?"

"Hell, yeah!" she yelled. "Why do you think people get executed? An eye-for-an-eye. White people just want to make believe that their system of laws is purer because shit is codified and written down on a piece of paper. It's the same shit." Her voice tapered into the soft rant of light irritation. "At least I can admit I'm racist."

"Maybe we all are," I offered.

"No doubt. If you in a shitty fishbowl, you covered in shit with all the other guppies."

But though I worried that Naima's mother would close her house because of all this soiled history, in fact, she became more friendly. When I visited, she offered me food, she made me sit and talk awhile. And when I got ready to leave, she said, "See you soon, dear. I love you."

When I went out with Naima to dinner, to the movies, to get coffee, I still sensed the glare of others. It was no longer a feeling. The stares were real. I saw old and young look at Naima and me—holding hands, angel kissing, lip kissing, nose kissing, karma kissing—and our presence seemed to shock their sensibilities, the old hatreds, the old taboos wearing fresh cologne. Occasionally, the degree of animosity became more than a strange look. As we walked down Fairfax on a Friday night after pastrami sandwiches at Canter's, a car sped by and someone yelled "White power!" out the window. Another time, someone in another passing car shouted "Jungle fever!" It amounted to very little, I guess. Just prolonging my suspicions that trouble lurked in any public space. When the moment came for Naima and me to make the ultimate physical connection, when we finally pulled off our clothes and, naked, pressed our bodies together, and found the moment pleasurable, it was sweet and lovely and as normal as lovemaking ever is. Inside, Naima was silk, she was sweetness, she was true. Afterwards, we held each other close as the sough of Hollywood street traffic sifted through the window like a blessing.

41.

Kong. King Kong.

One Saturday, home alone, I trudged through the last happy, two hundred pages of *Infinite Jest* and lit a stick of jasmine incense. Naima had told me she would be at my place in the afternoon sometime. The neighbor's stereo boomed Ranchera music so loud the window frames jiggled. Hours passed. Finally, I jumped in the shower, and then, suddenly, I heard Naima noisily coming through the door, yelling, ""Donkey Kong, where you hidin'?"

The previous time she'd found me in the shower, she'd taken off her clothes and joined me. This time, she came through the door, pulled the shower curtain to one side, and just stared. High cheekbones. Lips with a fullness that made me ache. A curve of brown filled with sugar 'till her shape seemed to burst. The anticipation, the sense that I would soon be pressing against her soft skin, tasting the cool hollows between her shoulder blades, the notion that my desire had completion with her, all this made me very happy.

"Well, well, well," she said, "what have we here?"

"Me Kong. King Kong." I beat my chest with my hands, each thump sounding a little louder than the previous one, a fine spray of water misting in the space between us.

"More like Ding Dong," she said, hands on her hips.

"Oh!" I stopped beating my chest and, fingers interlaced, staggered a little, joking, "Oh, my heart, my heart."

"Your heart ain't doin' nothin' that it wasn't doin' before. You might want to lay off the chocolate chip cookies," she said, shaking her head.

"I like chocolate," I said.

"Yeah, we know. Your gut likes it too."

"Do you like my gut?"

"I dunno, let me have a look." She bent and sniffed around my bare belly. "Well, you know, black folks always say y'all smell like bologna. I think they right."

"Cause Oscar Meyer has a way of gutting up the U.S.A."

"Yeah, you guttin' up alright."

"That's enough," I said, climbing out of the shower, reaching for her as she turned and dashed into the bedroom, "I'm gonna get you," I said, naked and dripping water everywhere, running after her saying, "I'm gonna get you and when I get you, I'm gonna eat you."

"Aaaaaa!!" she cried.

I caught her against the bedroom window and tickled her armpit, her leg, behind her ear, her ribs, until she collapsed on the floor out of breath. I slid beside her and held her close.

"Poppa," she said, having stopped giggling.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Do you love me?"

"Like a brother would."

"Poppa."

"Yeah?"

"You ain't no brotha."

I thought back to my struggles at Oberlin, my ridiculous battle with Kubla Khan for god's sake. Well, now I knew what that poem was about. I was Kubla and I *on honeydew hath fed/And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

42.

Was I Just As Racist As Everyone Else?

One night, we visited one of my old New Life alums, Dave D.

Dinner was over, and Naima and I sat with Dave and Joan on their cozy blue corduroy couch. Small white plates of strawberries and whipped cream were arrayed, half eaten, across the mahogany coffee table, the screen door open, candles flickering in the cool breeze blowing off the ocean.

"What's the one thing you've learned from Lester?" I asked Dave.

Dave looked at his wife, Joan, who was licking the tines of her fork.

"Lester?" Dave said. "Let me tell you. Lester didn't teach me much that I didn't already know."

"No?" I said.

"Darn it. I told Joan this already, I could have gotten sober anywhere. I was ready. I had already ruined three marriages, bankrupted my business, had a heart attack. I was ready to quit. New Life just happened to be the place I checked into. But I'd been to twelve other houses. Lot of us left a lot more wreckage than a youngster like you, Isaac."

"I know. I know."

"What do you think, Naima?" Dave asked.

Naima smiled and said, "Well, I think if it helps, that's all that matters. You don't have to like Lester."

"Yeah," I said. "Dave, you got to admit, even if Lester's methods weren't always sound, he set us on the right path. You're clean, I'm clean. We're building our lives back up."

"For today, Isaac. For today," Dave said, looking at Joan. "You just don't know about tomorrow."

"True."

Joan put her arm around Dave and said, "Naima, how'd you meet Isaac? Did you two grow up together?"

"Oh, no," she said, laughing. "We met through a political organization, at rallies against Bush, apartheid. That kind of thing."

"Naima is being generous," I said. "She is a tremendous speaker. We met at a youth organization called Bridges; Naima spoke to high school students about growing up near Hoover and Alvarado. I just happened to be in her shadow and somehow got her to notice me."

"Alvarado?" Dave asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Where you bought all your dope."

Naima shifted in her seat and put her hand on my arm. When I looked at her, I could see the faint hint of pique in her dimpled cheeks.

"What?" I asked.

She said nothing. Dave started talking again, about Lester and his failings, about spirituality, about the steps. Naima leaned back into the blue of the couch and was silent. Joan cleared the plates. We said our goodbyes and left.

As we drove home across town, I rattled on while Naima stared off into the night.

"That Dave, he really can complain. I remember when he came into New Life. He had nothing. Lost his house, his marriage, his kids, his business. Now he's getting it back and he's so ungrateful. He –"

"Isaac!" Naima's voice was sharp, angry. "What did you think you were doing back there?"

"What I do?"

"You don't know. Man, you can be so white."

"How white am I?"

"Don't be cute," she told me. "That shit you pulled about where I grew up, you didn't need to say all that. That was wrong. Why did you tell those people that? I don't know them."

"Was there something wrong with what I said? Dave's a friend. He likes you."

"You don't know that. People smile in your face and can hate your guts. You know they're probably back there now talking about us. And you gave them a reason to stereotype me. As if black people aren't stereotyped enough. They already expect that I lived in the ghetto, had a drunk mother, a father in prison, and a crappy education. You don't need to connect the dots for them."

"But they don't think that. Dave likes black people."

"Oh, shit! That's just the type of crap I'm talking about," she said. "'Dave likes black people,'" she said, my words all of a sudden horribly awkward.

"Does he like us because we're black? Is that all he sees? My skin color? And you went and confirmed all his racist beliefs. What does that make you?"

"I'm sorry. I'll try not to do it again"

"Well, sorry ain't good enough sometimes and you have to do a lot more than *try* if you want this relationship to work! Trying ain't anything anyway. You don't try to do, you *do*! Man, don't you know? No one wants us together. We're lucky we're in Los Angeles. If we were in Kansas, oh! There'd be hell every time we went out together. As it is, we get the stares and glares. The yells of 'jungle fever' from out the car of idiots. And you only see part of it. I get it every day. People following me around stores. Teachers expecting me to fail. College counselors advising me to set my sights a little lower, to not try and become a scientist. 'Just be a nurse,' they say. 'You'd make a great nurse.' Fuck that and fuck you if that's what you think is being supportive! That's what it's like every day for me and I got it much easier than a black man. Them, y'all just expect to be criminals. Black women: we're just those people who'll get loud and make a scene in a store, have babies with ten different men and live off welfare. That's how white people see us. And you're just as racist as them with the shit you pulled tonight."

"Naima, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you did. But I'll live. Shit, I've been through much worse than that."

I said nothing, feeling a mixture of tenderness and fear.

"Shit, every day I pass a white woman who clutches her purse when I walk by. They scared of me? You know? Afraid of me?"

"That's funny. You're not very scary. All five foot one of you."

She lowered her chin and shook her head. "That's very funny, Mr. Man. I am not no five foot one. You know I'm five two."

I started to laugh, and Naima stuck me in the side with her fingers.

"Stop," I said, "I'm driving. We'll crash and they'll find your body—all five foot one of you—by the side of the road."

She dug at my ribs and I struggled to steer the car all the way to Koreatown.

As Naima changed into her sleeping clothes, I brushed my teeth and looked into the mirror. Was I really a racist? Wasn't my affection for this woman proof against such a thing? I looked in the mirror and I saw someone I didn't know anymore.

I took a deep breath, and then I took another, and then I smiled.

43.

Sunnyvale

Work from the ad agency brought in an occasional couple hundred bucks every few months. While Naima worked at a cafeteria and took pre-med classes at Los Angeles City College, I looked for work along an area of Wilshire Boulevard known as the Miracle Mile, thinking, *certainly my college degree in English will get me in the door somewhere*. The broad boulevard, lined with tall, shimmering glass skyscrapers, seethed with multinational ad agencies, publishing houses, and museums, making it one of L.A.'s finest locales. Just to the north, fifteen blocks of historic apartment buildings lay along north-south streets named Masselin and Hauser and Cloverdale. The squat brick and masonry buildings, ivy trailing down their facades, seemed a desirable place to be near. But though I beat the boiling black pavement in sweaty suede shoes, handing out reams of cream-colored resumes heavy on italicized potential, I was hopeful about a cashier's position at the *99 cent* store.

Finally, I landed a job at a huge apartment complex, Sunnyvale Towers, as a leasing agent. Though my mind whirled with taglines and literary terms like *unheimlich*, to be a success at Sunnyvale I knew I must learn something of my father's idiom: the language of sales.

When I told Naima the news, she said, "Sounds good, Poppa."

"And I got a new copywriting project today from Summer. For Spielberg's new movie, *Saving Private Ryan*."

"Really?"

"I think the tagline is gonna be: "In a world of Private Honkies, Private Brown was the only one worth saving."

"That sucks."

"Okay, okay. What about, what about: "In war, sometimes we can only save those Browns we die for."

"They pay you for that crap?"

I tried to grab her, but she jumped up, letting out a scream, and I said, "Ok, Ms. Brown. What about this one—."

"Poppa, stop! It's getting a little old."

"Aww!" I hollered, saddened she didn't like *every one* of my jokes.

"When do you start?"

"Tomorrow."

"Well, then we better get you some clothes."

The next day, I arrived for work ready to lease apartments, a rash of ambition spreading across my skin, the mask of sales set on my face for its first performance.

Sunnyvale had all the modern conveniences – gated parking, security door, guard, a pool and Jacuzzi – you would expect from a Nixon-era construction. A marble-floored lobby pushed up against a gleaming brass-door elevator. An armed doorperson guarded the premises with a revolver and a heavy flashlight. The pastel pool waters, the leafy green fronds of potted baby palms, the

wallpapered hallways, purple wainscoting and lime moldings all suggested an air of refinement, a patina of arrival. This was, after all, Miracle Mile. Beverly Hills adjacent. But the polished exterior merely disguised a creeping urban decay. There were rats in the parking garage and giant cockroaches in the walls. Like most things in L.A., Sunnyvale looked ritzy on the outside, but was just as shabby as anything else once you came through the security doors.

What really brought in the money was Hancock Park--the site of the La Brea Tar Pits and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art--right across the street.

By L.A. standards, Hancock is a huge greensward. Twelve whole acres. What is now a moderate Mediterranean climate of car exhaust and celebrity *frisson* was once a Pleistocene, semi-tropical region much like the present day redwood forests that cover Steinbeck country four hundred miles to the north. Water cut many grooves in the Los Angeles Basin and mammals, having survived the Great Extinction, gathered around the main waterways and tributaries of the ancient Los Angeles River. Some must have waded into the ancient Rancho La Brea Creek and when they began to feel the grip of tar, panicked, and thrust themselves back along the banks. Others waded in too far and were stuck there forever. The saber-toothed tiger, the giant sloth, the dire wolf and the American mastodon are all gone, but the tar still seeps up from a deep underground pool to ooze out here and there beside the feet of the drunks and the tourists and the dog-walking locals. Sunnyvale Towers practically floated on the tar. Indeed, the elevator shafts were drained every six months. Some even whispered that the Black Dahlia was trapped in an underground bolus of black muck somewhere

below P2. With all that history around it, selling Sunnyvale should have been something I could handle. In my father's idiom, it should have been "an easy sell."

My new boss, the manager, Doug Ignorton, spelled out the major considerations on the first day. "Here's the deal, Isaac. All you need to know are three things. One, fill the vacancies. Two, let repairs wait. Three, if someone moves out, see rule number one. It's a piece of cake."

I was to talk-up the benefits, whet the prospect's appetite, close the deal. I would learn the subtle art of feigning interest, of chit-chat, of building rapport, qualifying, the trial close, and asking for the money.

As a result of Mr. Goldrich's loan obligations to HUD, Sunnyvale reserved a certain percentage of apartments for qualifying, low-income applicants. Elderly Russians made up a great percentage of these applicants and constituted a steady flow into the rental office to request what they called *special* applications, by which they meant the reduced rent program. Since I was new to salesmanship, and eager to show my skills, I wasn't initially bothered by the unceasing flow of broken, halting English. The elderly Slavs were a low buzz in the background of the rhythms of the day. However, I grew to dislike their presence.

It wasn't that I didn't empathize with them. I did. At least I tried to. I mean, I am a third-generation, East European-American Jew for Christ's sake. Some raging Cossack may have beaten my great-great-great cousin into the squalid mud road of his Odessan *shtetl*. How could I fail to empathize with any-

one from that part of the world be they Slav, Semite or whatever the hell they called themselves? The bones of my ancestors lay there in the earth as sure as the fossils lay in the tar. I imagined the struggles these newly arrived Slavs must have faced over the years in communist Russia: for food, for warmth, for affection. The fresh green breast of sunny Southern California must have seemed like something they could feast on forever. To my benighted vision, however, their desperation, their creaky gait, their age seemed a spirited offense to my good American blood. They had come to America's feast late in the game, while I was raised on it.

I usually took my lunch in the park and sat on a bench beside the Mammoth exhibit. It occupied a large gated area bordering Wilshire Boulevard. In a lake half as long as a city block, where gas bubbled up here and there from some great underground sea of tar, curators from the museum had created a life-sized reproduction of a scene out of the ancestral pachyderm's archetypal consciousness. A mature female and her baby stood on the shore, their trunks extended in agony, reaching out for a large male who stood, twenty feet into the water, stuck up to the shin in the sucking black maw, his grey trunk outstretched like a giant trumpet, forever cut off from what one could only suppose was his mate and their child. Of course the mammoths were replicas, lifesize plaster copies of the real thing, but the simulated family drama somehow touched me.

One dreary late October day during my lunch break, having not spoken to my father in a few weeks, I felt particularly downcast and kicked the dirt in front

of the bench, anger pushing inside me until my chest felt like it would break. It began to drizzle, and having forgotten my umbrella, I tromped back to Sunnyvale, damp and dejected. When I returned to the office, I sat at my desk, sullen and distant, mulling over my troubles while typing up an eviction notice. Doug asked me if anything was wrong.

"Oh, nothing that a little money wouldn't fix," I wisecracked.

He smiled and removed his glasses. "You know, Isaac, you should put in an application for the reduced rent program."

Stunned at this unexpected opportunity, I cried in disbelief, "No! Am I eligible? Doesn't it take months for that stuff to go through?"

"Sure," Doug replied, "it takes a little time. But believe me, your application will go through like a bullet. You're an employee. You do a terrific job. You know what? If you fill out an application today, I'll drop it off at headquarters tomorrow. I have to attend a meeting there anyway."

I pulled out the form. In five minutes, I was an applicant.

Two weeks later, I got the good news.

"You're in," Doug said with a smile. "Apartment two-forty-five. Not facing the park, but it does face the pool. You'll have plenty of natural light in the mornings since you face southeast. And your rent is only $468 a month."

When he handed me the key, I wanted to hug him. I wanted to call Naima, but she was at work. So I called my father to give him the good news.

"Dad?"

"Isaac. Is that you? I was wondering where you were."

"I'm at work. Like every day," I droned.

"Isaac, don't kvetch. What are you doing?"

"A little of this, a little of that."

I wanted to tell him about my new apartment, but before I could broach the subject, he said, "Great. Great. Just keep at it."

"It's pretty boring. But –"

"Hey, life is mostly boring. You've just got to get out there and *make shit happen!* You know, when your grandfather first came to this country he had nothing. Nada."

My hand started to go limp and my arm suddenly sagged toward the floor. Unfortunately, I could still hear him.

"And he was a genius in mathematics," he droned. "Read about imaginary numbers and other things I don't even know what to call them, for fun! In the bathroom while on the toilet. Offered a full scholarship to M.I.T. And he turned it down, so he could keep working in the family candy shop in Brooklyn! Your dear departed Aunt Dotty probably could have invented the Human Genome everybody talks about now. But she had to raise your mother. Don't be such an ingrate. Remember, not everyone can afford the things you have. "

I looked around the office. Doug was picking his nose, trying to shield himself from the tenants' prying eyes with a lease agreement. An empty bottle of Yoo-hoo stood on my desk next to a ratty leather bag I was using as a wallet. I

pulled the phone back to my ear, and said, "I know Marty was a genius. He turned down M.I.T. He turned down Trotsky. He turned down God himself –"

"Son, don't doubt it. We do what we have to. It will all be okay in the end."

Whatever he meant by "the end," I didn't care.

When our call was over, I put the phone gently into its cradle. I could hear a helicopter flying overhead and a Korean couple fighting in the apartment above.

44.

Yes, she said. Yes, I will. Yes

That night, I purchased an engagement ring: a narrow gold band, with a small, twinkling diamond in the middle. On the drive home, I kept taking the box out of my pocket and looking at it. It rose into a tiny perch which held the sparkling diamond. With this ring, I would even then have thee wed me, Naima Brown, you bright hard gemstone.

When I got to her house, she was arguing with her mom.

"Give me my muthafuckin' keys, bitch! I will beat your brains out with this glass if I—"

"You're too drunk to drive!" Naima yelled. She held a set of keys behind her back in one hand.

I had opened the unlocked door, and stood watching them. They both looked at me as if I was the source of the problem, Naima's eyes narrowing, Maude's mouth dropping open. Maude looked down at my feet and said, "Okay, little bitch. Here's yo' vanilla daddy. Go get your medicine, little bitch."

Naima threw the keys at her mother. They bounced off her chest and disappeared behind the couch. "I hope you die, mom. I really do," she said, taking my hand and leading me out the door.

She led me up the stairs to the roof. When we sat down on a heating duct, she put her elbows on her knees and sucked her thumb. I put my arm around

her and looked out toward the east, the downtown Angelesque play of sky-scraper and electrified light like some eccentric cutout from an epic musical.

After awhile, Naima leaned against me and sighed. "Well, that's my mother for you. That's a real drunk."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"Don't be. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I've never had someone tell me not to apologize."

"If the shoe don't fit then—."

"Yeah, so much of how my family relates is based on some weird idea of allegiance or—."

"It's based on fakeness. And conditions. Watch. If you continue to date me, you'll see your family slowly begin to distance themselves from you. They'll be afraid of me, and they'll blame it on my being black."

"I know this isn't a smooth transition. But—." She had been staring out into the distance as we talked, and at my announcement, she turned her head and looked at me, her eyes reflecting the hard glint of the night. "—I have two things to ask you. One of them is fairly risky, the other is ridiculous."

"Okay," she said, laughing, "Let's have the ridiculous question first."

"Okay," I sighed, "Here goes. Sit up."

I got to my feet, got down on one knee, and reached in my pocket.

"Oh, no!" she cried, her voice cracking. "Oh, no!" she cried again. "No."

"Naima," I said, my heart banging away in my chest. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I will. Yes."

A few moments later she asked what the other question was, and I asked her to move into Sunnyvale with me. "In the caverns measureless to man," I added, with a flourish.

"We're gonna' live in a cavern?" she said.

""Si, senorita linda."

"Forget it, then. The wedding is off."

45.

With Comet!? Ever?

One morning a few weeks after moving, a little past dawn, I pressed against Naima's side. She stirred slightly and flung her arm across my belly, and I slowly, inch by crooked inch, shifted a higher on my pillow, until her hand brushed against my genitals. But just as I became aroused, she flipped over and I writhed in frustration: hard, hopeless and adrift in a blurry rage.

I propped myself up so her hand dangled over my slowly hardening penis. Still half asleep, I felt her squeeze it lightly. I grew hard, and got on top of her and thrust until I had come, grunting as I rolled off.

I jumped out of bed and got her a hot, wet rag. As she wiped herself clean, I asked if she liked it.

"It was okay," she said, inspecting the yellow rag.

"You didn't like it?"

"It was okay! Damn! It's not like I wanted to do it." She looked up at me and said, "Men, y'all think you're so special. You ain't all that. Women don't even really need you anymore. We can make babies without cha little dick."

"Hey baby, what do you want to do today?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Why are you changing the subject so fast?"

Suddenly, I felt the burn of acid rise up from my stomach and I reverted to silence. I had a sudden compulsion to urinate, and I walked out of the bedroom

and into the dirty bathroom, the bright Hollywood sunshine pouring through the window.

"What a day!" I shouted, stretching my arms above my head, grasping the white molding above the bathroom door.

"What? I can't understand you!"

I squeezed a curl of toothpaste onto the bristles of the brush and began the daily ritual. She yelled again while I finished brushing, spit the paste and water into the clogged sink, and hollered back, "I said, 'What a day.'"

She leaned against the bathroom doorframe and said, "Isaac, did you spit in the sink?"

"No," I replied, wiping my hands on a towel.

She was still naked as she peered into the porcelain. The rank, brown clot slowly swirled around the rectangular bowl as the water sucked down the drain. When it was all gone, the maleficent lump lay against the chrome plug like a scar.

"Isaac! See this is what I'm talking about! I asked you not to spit in the sink, not to spit in the shower! To spit in the toilet! But you just don't listen! You think you can do whatever you want. That it doesn't matter the sink is clogged and you're too cheap to buy some Drain-O and I have to look at your disgusting spit. This shit ain't fair! I'm the one who is going to have to clean it up!"

I thought of the song, "Moon River," the exquisite interval in the first measure. I thought of Frank Bascombe and Rabbit Angstrom. They must be

having the time of their lives out there in the world of fiction. I thought of my father eating and the way he would clap his hands together and say, "Great!"

"Well?" Naima asked, tapping her foot.

"I don't know." I stared down at the brown carpet. I stared at the door's white moldings, scraped and shredded by a previous owner's dog. I tapped my knee, and then circled it with my thumb and index finger.

"Isaac, how can you not know? It's a simple question. Why the fuck did you spit in the sink?"

"I don't know. It just happened so fast. I . . ."

I looked down at my feet. I thought they were rather long. Jesus! I remembered that time Naima said Shaquille O'Neal waved to her as he drove down Melrose in a gold Hummer. It was just one thing after another, a castration, as they say. Freud himself said that--.

"Well?" she shouted. "Don't make me be your mother, Isaac."

"I'm sorry, it just slipped out all of a sudden. I promise, I won't do it again."

"Yeah, whatever. And you promised to clean the bathroom too. Have you done that. Ever?"

"Yeah," I sheepishly replied.

"When?"

"Last week I swept the floor," I croaked.

"No, you did not! You did not sweep the floor last week!!"

"Yes--," I started to reply, but she cut me off.

"Look. You are such an idiot, man. I was here all week, and you did not sweep this bathroom, Isaac. And that's another thing. You just make shit up. You never swept the bathroom. What about the sink? Or the toilet? Or the bathtub? Have you ever scrubbed them? I mean scrubbed!? With soap!? With Comet!? Ever?"

"Naima, I love you."

"Bullshit!"

46.

Sorry, Sorry, Sorry

And though I swear I was in love with the gumdrop valentine that was Naima, I was angry, humiliated at the events of that morning. I strayed away, and instead of going to a meeting that night, walked into a call girl's apartment with a fistful of twenties, saw her white canopied bed, her painted face, and suddenly felt ill, handed the woman a crumpled twenty and rushed back to my car. When I got home, I confessed--and the rest of our relationship was on the other side of that night.

"Why Isaac? Why?" she cried. "I trusted you!"

I said I was sorry, sorry, sorry.

"Yeah, you one sorry muthafucka."

"Naima, please I—."

"No."

"I—."

"Oh, hell no!"

"I—."

"Oh, hell no! I ain't marrying you!"

47.

A Size That Fit Right By The Water

One night, I went to a men's meeting at a Presbyterian church on Gower. A small meeting of perhaps two dozen, mostly old-timers; middle-aged, graying men in slacks and loosened ties. From these, I hoped I might find some consolation. When it was my turn to share, I walked up to the podium and said, "I'm sober a few years now, and I've worked the steps with my sponsor, but I feel awful, you know?" I saw a few nod their heads in agreement. I continued, "I know our primary purpose is to stay sober, and I don't know if this is recovery or not, but I just want to be touched." At this, several of the younger men started to laugh. When I added, "I'm serious!" they laughed even harder, coffee spilling out of their white Dixie cups and splattering on the speckled linoleum. "It feels so wrong, like I have an addiction to being touched." Now, the younger ones stopped laughing and there was a moment of silence until I added, "I think I'm allergic to my fiancé." At that, everyone—even the oldest of the old-timers—laughed while I grimaced in shame.

Not everyone thought my problem comic. After the meeting, someone came up to me and told me about another 12-step meeting I might want to investigate. The next day, I went to my first meeting of Sex Addicts Anonymous.

I imagined it would be a place full of men in long overcoats, talking about exposing themselves in public, about incest and rape and bestiality, all the things I had read about in my parents' books so long before, but it was just guys like

me. And a few meetings, and I felt comfortable, felt I was part of any other 12-step group, any society of like-minded individuals. Which didn't make it any easier. The first awful details I shared felt like they were shearing off my lips like a thawing iceberg. At some point, I broke, saying, "I betrayed the woman I love, and I betrayed myself, again. Even though I haven't gotten high in two years, I feel like I might as well be drunk. I risked arrest, disease, and god knows what else, and I don't even know why."

The S.A.A. meetings began to help. I wasn't alone anymore. I could talk about *Stud* and the other books I read as a child. About the compulsion to go to a massage parlor, so strong I would steal money from my father, ready myself on the table, naked, for the girl—and even if she turned out to be nearly as old as my grandmother—let her touch my genitals. The awful pain afterwards. The hot semen pooling in my bellybutton, dripping into my anus. The old woman chattering at me in broken English. How could I take myself so low? Why? The meetings, the shared sense of restoring our inner selves, gave me a steady confidence. Slowly, the mental train that started with a lick of libido, the sight of an apple-bottom ass, the sparkling of associations that led to the massage parlor—the whole constellation of loneliness started to fizz out. I could walk down the street and not want to drink in the swerve of a sexy noun. I didn't want sex at all. I just wanted to be close to Naima. To talk to her in the easy way we used to. I craved her honesty, but her honesty was sharp and often brutal.

She was tired from working and studying all day, tired of all the expectations created by her being the first in the family to go to college, tired of feeling

the pressure of white and black worlds pushing against her until she told me *I just don't want to be here.*

When we weren't fighting, we'd curl up together on the battered old brown couch we'd bought from Clint for fifty bucks and watch sitcoms.

One night, on my way home from a meeting, I stopped at a florist and bought a dozen yellow daffodils.

When I got home, I walked up to Naima, who sat cross-legged looking out into the Sunnyvale courtyard, the flowers behind my back.

"Guess what I got you?" I said.

"What?" she replied, the tone of her voice anticipating some accompanying disappointment.

"These," I said, biting my lip as Naima accepted the bouquet with a half smile.

"These are pretty," she said, testing for a scent. "Not very smelly. Well," she continued, handing the flowers back to me, "go get that vase off the top of the 'fridge, and put them in water." As I did so, my heart began to leap up ever so slightly. Maybe she was reconsidering my offer. Suddenly she said, "I think I should do something for my mother. You know, I just feel like something bad is going to happen if I don't. What do you think?"

I was hesitant to say anything. I didn't know where this was going, and I had visions of Maude sitting on the couch next to us smoking Newports and drinking herself into a state of unreasonableness.

"Isaac? You're not saying anything."

I forced a reply, stammering, "I don't know. Yeah. You, we, should probably see what's up with her."

"You are so wishy-washy. Oooh!! Asshole!" All of a sudden she was at the high end of anger, and she yelled, "Would you please leave?"

"Why should I leave? I didn't do anything."

"Just leave!"

"But why?" I pleaded.

"Because you're acting like an asshole. That's why."

"Why do you have to call me names?" I shouted back, now fully enraged.

"Because that's what you are!" she yelled, the sound of her voice pelting my ears, spit shooting out of her mouth and flecking my cheek. She took a breath, and pushed her hands down as if trying to release a heavy weight, her head, her sweet oval face suddenly hideous, finally looking back into my eyes and screaming, "Oooh!! Your distant ways are really fucking up this relationship! You make me so mad sometimes. I hate feeling like this!"

Her voice was a great bellows flaming the fires of a tinderbox I feared must be filled with an endless supply of fuel. I had to make her calm down. The anger seemed to curl around my ankles, shake my knees, and stir my gut into a thousand little fissures. She was so loud. What was she capable of? I tried my Buddhist exercises, breathing slowly, witnessing the wisp of air curl around my nose, reminding myself that form is emptiness, emptiness is form … But she continued to rant, and after she finished I said, "Why do you have to raise your voice so loud?"

"Who the fuck cares how loud my voice is? Who? What are you afraid of Isaac? Because I really would like to know." She dropped her hands to her hips and waited, tapping her foot.

How could I explain to her that I wasn't used to this kind of confrontation? This level of intensity? Where would I begin? I was afraid of many things. Of being frank, of fighting, of fungible desires and strange fat images that floated through my brain at the most inappropriate times—and my mind wandered far out into space, past the Moon, past the Asteroid Belt even, and I looked back from that height and saw a great rain of fire and a great whirlwind of smoke covering the Earth. And I thought of Dizzy Gillepsie, that high screaming note at the very apex of his solo on "Night In Tunisia." I would catch that note, it was so high and free, and use it to caress my love's face.

I needed to be unselfish. What would an unselfish person do?

Suddenly Naima picked up the vase next to the couch, dumped the yellow daffodils on the floor, and threw the twisted glass, etched with the tracings of some Arcadian realm, against the wall, shattered pieces flying everywhere.

"Why did you do that!" I cried.

But she just kept on talking, pushing against my chest, escalating—a sudden, sharp incline in tension, hitting me with her hands. I covered my face, not to shield myself from physical pain but because I felt so ashamed of what I had done to throw this poison into our relationship. "Please, Naima. Let's not fight. Please, please!"

But, again, she just said, "Fuck you! Fuck you! *Please, please get the fuck out!* You never have anything to say. You just sit there like a lump of shit. Don't you have any backbone? Don't you?"

"Forget this. I'm out of here," I said, heading for the door.

"Good. Get the fuck out! And don't come back!!"

I left, and as I moved through the halls I heard the smash of plates and glasses breaking one after the other against the floor.

I headed through the park. The leafy park across the street. The museum-going tourists rushed by toward Picasso's *Crying Woman* and ancient Buddhist sculptures and cappuccinos in the candle-lit courtyard, full of expectation. But my cup of life was now cracked, broken, scattered across the ground of my heart. I found my old bench in front of the mammoth exhibit, the outstretched trunk of Papa Mammoth suddenly heartbreaking. Though people walked by, they headed towards the art museum, and in the semi-darkness, I wept. And when I had cried the heaviness had changed into something like purpose. I must change my life. There was an order to the universe that could guide my actions. Be honest with her, I thought. However loud the bustling crowd of fears in my gut clamored for my silence. I took a deep breath. And another. In a little while I was calm again and ready to go back inside. I looked out at the mammoths and imagined what life would be like as a small mammal in the Pleistocene era. Along the banks of the ancient Los Angeles River. Safe among the reeds. A size that fit right by the water.

I came home after a few hours, going directly into the bedroom and changing into my pajamas.

Naima came to the door, looking sad. She said, "Are you going to leave forever?"

"No. I'm not going anywhere," I said. The moonlight came through the window, and I walked over and pulled her close, holding her gently and kissing her forehead. "I'm sorry," I told her. "I shouldn't be such a bump on a log." She pressed her face into my chest, and I felt like the most powerful man in the world.

Soon we sat, the cold dark night pressed away, out beyond the closed curtains, cuddling in the soft glow of hot skin and propinquity. There was so much to do. To feel. I imagined I floated above the Earth and looked through time. And I saw back through ages of human experience, through the very evolution of consciousness, from Lascaux cave artists and Shiva and Abraham, Aeneus, the modern Angstroms and Blooms--all those men who had ripped their hearts on the thorn of a woman. I would be on the side of those who had found a true partnership; the only flaps of skin that mattered was our tongues and ears; the only reason for being was being together, whispering to each other about the way the bird-song from the park was our secret symphony, of the way the pyramid of plums at the market was our special harvest, of the advent of a new morning and the warm pulse of our hearts, soft mallets on the drum of our cool cotton sheets.

48.

One Art: Special Ed

On a Friday evening, we drove to my father's house to have dinner.

"Come in! Come in!" my father exclaimed.

"Welcome, welcome!" K. added.

After the hugs, we stood in the hallway on the flagstones that led off into a large carpeted living room, and I looked around, seeing my father's new house as if for the first time.

On the wall beyond the door hung a signed Henri Bresson photograph. In it, diffident prostitutes peer over the wooden stalls along some back alley, third-world red light district. Their eyes show no pleasure as they stare at the camera, frozen in angry despair, while I searched for warmth in this place that had once been the scene of such isolation. K. had definitely changed things. There were hundreds of glazed Santa Fe crockpots, a Klee lithograph, a coil of thick rope, four Pueblo masks, two pink ostrich feathers, a Kente rug hanging above the fireplace, a towering tin sculpture of Richard Nixon made out of used Boston Baked Bean cans, a whole wall of canary yellow cuckoo clocks, and what looked like a corn tortilla.

When I asked my father about the tortilla he said, "It's from Chavez Ravine. Before the Dodgers came in, there was a thriving community. When the O'Malley's got their sweetheart deal from the city, the city bulldozed a whole

neighborhood. Just as the people were getting ready to leave, the Virgin Mary appeared in this very corn tortilla. It is quite an important relic."

"Why do you have it?" Naima asked warmly.

"Well, I'm the President of the Arts Council, and it's sort of on loan."

"Oh," Naima said, adding, "It must be really nice to have it here."

My father sighed, and said, "It is. Art is a great joy."

"Oh, I have to check on the fish." K. exclaimed, slapping my father's knee.

He turned to me, his belly brushing against my arm, and said, "You know we're having company."

"Besides us?"

"Yes. The Smollens. You remember them, Isaac. They're just back from Africa. I thought it would be nice to have them over."

K. had been cooking away, several pots announced their boiling presence, and the sound of bubbling liquids competed with the warble of Stan Getz's , third-stream album, *Focus,* the saxophonist's leathery timbre a little overloud.

Naima and I followed K. into the kitchen, my father taking a seat in his wicker chair, pulling up his chapped heel, and rubbing with slow deliberation. Naima and I sat at the table.

"Would you like something to drink?" my father said, his eyes batting from some unrevealed motivation.

"Water would be really good," Naima said.

My father looked at K., and she opened a cabinet over the counter, pulled out two thick blue goblets, opened the stainless steel, double-door 'fridge, removed two large green bottles of Evian, and brought the drinks to the table.

"It was a long drive," I said, suddenly uncomfortable with the silence. Sunnyvale was a thirty minute drive from Santa Monica. "We only stopped for cheetos and slurpees."

"Why? Why did you do that?" K. said. "Don't you have money for food?"

"No," I answered.

"Excuse me," my father cut in, dropping his heel to the floor, then reaching down to pull it up again. "Why don't you have any money?"

"I'm just joking," I told him. "We didn't eat cheetos. I have money."

K. sighed heavily, and said, "Well, you shouldn't kid about these things. Lots of people have nothing in the world. They make do."

"I know," I told her, feeling a sinking in my gut.

"I know you know, Isaac. You should act better."

Naima smiled at me ever so slightly, shaking her head with the slightest sway of derision, silently mouthing the word, "Yeah," and raising her eyebrows. Under the cover of the tablecloth, I nudged her foot, and she stepped on my big toe as she told K., "Well, I'm hungry!"

"Good," K. replied, laughing, her long red bangs shaking. "You know, I have worked really hard on this meal. So you better like it," she said, waving her finger at Naima.

There was a moment of silence. A moment when I felt something solid in my gut, some thread of strength finish a seam that was formerly loose. I sat in the silence, reached for Naima's hand under the table. But I found her soft wrist instead. I pressed my fingers against her, and I could feel her pulse, its beat gently tracing a rhythm, the irrepressible alternation of blood and silence.

The Smollens arrived and we sat down around the rosewood table to eat.

The appetizer was a platter of heirloom tomatoes swimming in balsamic vinegar. For the entrée, K. served baked salmon in a basil puree, and julienned green beans with almond slices. For dessert, crème brulée.

Dinner table discussion was varied and intellectual. My father related an intricate story about a failing oil development business propped up by sham accounting. The Smollens detailed their latest visit to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

After awhile, in a sign that the evening was winding down, property values took center stage.

K. declared, "The market is really horrible. Everything is so depressed."

"Oh, don't we know it," Mrs. Smollen chimed in, tapping her husband on the hand, "Why, we live in the Palisades, but we may as well live in Compton."

Mrs. Smollen quickly realized she had made an indelicate remark, and tried to cover up her faux pas with a titter. I reached for my drink. Everyone seemed to reach for something--a fork, a napkin; Gene Smollen tucked his shirt a little further into his gut. A horrible silence followed, punctuated by K. rear-

ranging her silverware and Mrs. Smollen's titter turning into a hacking cough. Gene filled her glass with bubbly water and said, "Here, dear."

My father moved his glass to one side, methodically sweeping the tablecloth in front of him free of crumbs, and said, "Well, our house has not appreciated that much. On average—"

"You mean the mean, right?" Gene Smollen interjected. Gene was a Certified Public Accountant.

K., nearly hysterical, cried, "The mean?"

"The mean," Mr. Smollen intoned.

K.'s eyes shifted from me to Naima to my father.

My father began launching into an explanation, "Yes, well Gene is, in fact, correct. The mean is—" But then he paused, his eyes blinking with what I could only hope was good intention, and asked Naima, "How is school going, dear?"

Her face had shown no discomposure at Mrs. Smollen's comment, and now she smiled at my father and said, tersely, "Good."

Perhaps to move even further into a more comfortable territory, Gene asked, "And what would you be studying at school, Nyesha?"

"Biochemistry."

"Oh," Gene responded cheerily, "Do you want to be a nurse?"

"No," Naima answered, her forehead wrinkling.

I told Gene, "She's a biochemist. A *scientist*."

As my final word hung in the air, Gene's complexion shifted from pallid to a flushed red under his jowls.

"Really," Mrs. Smollen said. "I have a cousin who's a Professor at Harvard. Do you know Jack Steinman? A great man."

Naima shook her head.

My father cleared his throat and nodded at K. who said, "Why don't we move to the living room for coffee?"

We sank into the soft leather couches, and my father asked us each to name our favorite book.

When the question came around to me I said I didn't like to read anymore.

When it was Naima's turn, she smiled and said, "I don't like to read novels, but I like non-fiction."

My father and K. and the Smollens couldn't tell if she was being serious or flip, so, to clarify, I said, "She's serious. She only reads Calculus."

"Well," K. said, "I just finished a marvelous thing called Purple Hibiscus. Quite an anomaly. If you can imagine, it is a *Bildungsroman* from out of Africa. About a young Nigerian woman. But it's really *so* universal."

"Oh, how interesting!" Mrs. Smollen cooed. "I just love ethnic novels."

"You know, our ancestors," my father announced, looking at Naima, "the Jews of Eastern Europe, went through a lot of the same type of persecution as your people. Of course, things are better now."

"Really?" Naima asked. "Better how?"

"I know there is much to be done. But there are more opportunities. More blacks moving into the middle class. More—."

"Do you read the papers?" Naima interjected.

"Y-yes."

"You live in Los Angeles. The last riots were just a few years ago. What were they over? You think it was just Rodney King?"

"Whatever the underlying socioeconomic inequities, if you speed then--."

I leaned forward, my hands across my knees. "So you've never sped, Dad?"

"Oh!," K. cried. "Why are you jumping on your father? After all he's done for you!"

"Wouldn't you fight back?" Naima asked K. "Are you going to let some po-lice beat you with a wooden stick fifty times? Come on! Come on, now!"

My father sat forward on the couch readying a reply, but K. cut him off, her voice a mixture of assumption and finality. "Oh, honey. Jews went through terrible, terrible suffering. Six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. It was the banality of evil."

"The *banality of evil*?" Naima replied, instantaneously. "Oh, please. Banality? It was boring, yeah. Hitler killed a lot of people. He killed a lot of his own people. Just like this country. He killed gays and blacks but you're not talking about that. Poor people are starving in this city right now. Listen, the Holocaust was sixty years ago--."

"We must never forget," K. cried, clutching her hands to her face.

Later that night, while we lay in bed together, Naima asked, "Do you get the feeling everyone sounded like a cliché tonight?"

"Cliché?"

"I was the self-righteous black woman. K. was the indignant Jewish lady. You were the sullen child--."

"Yeah," I said, interrupting her. "This happens with us, too. It's so hard to have a different conversation about politics. Everything just congeals into the same old junk."

"Are we just some sort of cookie-cutter people or what?"

"We're Oreos. I don't know what the appropriate confectionary cliché is for my dad and K."

"Ding Dongs? Anyway," she said, raising her eyes. "Now I know why you're so retarded."

"Shut up," I told her, trying to kiss her on the forehead. She pulled away, and I said, my face turned toward the floor, "But I am special."

"Yeah! Special ed." And for the first time since my confession, she let me bring my face as close as possible to hers without touching. I looked at her lips, and she put her finger to mine, again saying, a little softer then, "Special Ed."

And then I kissed her, once, on the nose.

49.

Sexual Healing

One day I walked out of an S.A.A. meeting, angry I'd been passed over when my hand went up to share, furious with these people and their fucking meetings, compelled to shoot off in my car as fast as possible when suddenly I realized I might go back inside while the people congregated after the meeting and *ask someone else how they were doing?* In retrospect, it seems such a silly little thing.

When I got back inside, I stuck my hand out to the first person I saw.

"Hi, I'm D-david," he said.

"Hey. How you doin'?"

"Okay, Okay. I've got a year of abstinence now," he smiled. He was an older man with a finely trimmed, thin white beard and close-cropped white hair. The most distinctive thing about his body were his tattoos. His arms were a work of art. He was wearing a colorful wool vest and I could see Kandinsky shapes—green funnels, red spirals, kaleidoscopic geometric shapes of all shapes and sizes-- running down his forearms, his limbs pointing to some mystic wisdom.

"A year," I said, letting out a low whistle.

"Well, I was out there for a long time. Probably longer than you've been alive. Just stick around. See what happens."

He hugged me then, a good strong embrace, and excused himself.

I moved around the room, looking to see if I could add some brightness to someone else's day. Asking how they felt. Asking what was making them feel good.

Later, when I drove away on Olympic Boulevard and turned on the radio, the sound of Marvin Gaye's *Sexual Healing* sailed out of the speakers. *Get up, Get up, Get up, Get up, let's make love tonight/Wake up, Wake up, Wake up, Wake up, 'cause you do it right.*

I mused over all our recent fighting, the intensity of Naima's anger. Would I end up repeating my father's mistakes? I felt so clearly in that moment that the only way to live was to live for others. And I swear I felt the spirit of St Francis of Assisi reach through the centuries—the man who inspired the very naming of Los Angeles, the Spanish monks coming upon the Los Angeles River on August 2nd, 1769, following the feast in his honor and christening the new land El Rio de Nuestra Senora la Reyna de Los Angeles de Porciuncula. The land of the little church where St. Francis ministered, the Porciuncula.

St Francis, whose prayer appeared on a page in the readings of a self-help meeting in a Lutheran church on Olympic Boulevard, the words read low and hopeful:

Lord,
Make me a channel of thy peace.
That where there is hatred, I may bring love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.
Where there is discord, harmony.

Where there is error, truth.
Where there is wrong, the spirit of forgiveness.
Lord, grant that I may seek
to comfort, rather than to be comforted
to understand, than to be understood
to love, than to be loved.
For it is by self-forgetting that one finds.
It is by giving that one receives.
It is by forgiving that one is forgiven.
It is by dying that one awakens to eternal life.

I had asked for David's phone number and I called him later that week. I told him about the troubles I was having with Naima, with my dad.

"Umm," he said as I talked. When I finished he told me, "Well, you know, I never got along with my dad until I had a child. I know there's a s-s-strain of anti-intellectualism in 12-step, but I believe some of this s-stuff just works on its own timetable. I've been married for more than thirty years and my wife and I still get in bad fights every so often. Wouldn't be a r-r-real r-r-relationship if you didn't. How are you doing with the Program?"

"Really well," I told him. "When I'm not worrying about how I'm going to act out, planning what I'm going to do, all my energy seems to go in a better direction, especially since I realized I could contribute, and not just take."

"Umm."

"I walked out of the meeting when I met you and that corny song "Sexual Healing" came on the radio—"

"Umm."

"Marvin Gaye, right."

"Yeah, actually I wr-r-r-rote that lyric with Marvin."

"What?" I said, dumbstruck.

"I was workin' on a book with him. We were hangin' out in Denmark, and we wr-r-r-rote it."

"Wow!" I replied.

"Umm, yeah. But that's great, Isaac, that you're feeling different. You know, Juicy Lucy's gonna' be there tomorrow. Just let her go for today. S-s-s-s S-s-sounds like you're doing okay."

Soon I was calling David every day, and he became something of a mentor—or as they say in 12-step, a sponsor--though we didn't work the steps.

50.

A Momentary Precision

In September of that year, Naima took a job at the restaurant on the corner, Marie Callenders. They put her in the bakery where she worked about thirty hours a week.

She often shared shifts with a young woman named Juanita. Naima always looked younger than her age, barely sixteen in her uniform: black skirt, white shirt. Together, Naima and Juanita would lighten their shifts with talk of men and movies, the celebrities that frequented the restaurant, the warm smell of pies baking in the ovens. Their conversation was friendly and a soft cordiality sprang up between them. I could see them laugh together when I eavesdropped from the lobby, standing behind a display case of cherry and apple pies, gazing at Naima standing in short sleeves, the smooth lines and angle of her limbs like golden boughs; her cocoa face, her round cheeks and explosive smile, my passport into a magical world where taboo dissolved in the sweet texture of discovery.

For me alone I saw a halo hovering over her as she moved to serve lemon meringue and hot coffee, exchanging niceties with the customers, commiserating with Juanita about surly customers. After a few minutes, I would move up to the counter and pretend I didn't know her, asking, "Miss, what's the apple pie made with?"

It felt good to coax a smile out of her, to hear her say, "Silly man."

One night, Naima working, I sat at home reading James's The Sacred Fount, there was a knock at the door. When I opened it, Doug was standing there picking his nose.

""You won't believe it," he said, putting his hand behind his back. I could see a smudge of soot under his eyes.

"Doug, what's wrong?"

"Rico and Mr. Johnny locked themselves in 314 and started a fire."

Mr. Johnny was the newest addition to the maintenance crew. He was a younger man, but everyone called him Mr. Johnny because he thought he was so smooth. His hair, greased with pomade, his clothes ironed to a fine precision.

"Oh, fuck," I said, sniffing the air, confused. "Doug, I don't smell any smoke."

"That's because we just finished putting it out, but not before it ruined the carpet and the walls in the bedroom. They must have gotten drunk while they were smoking. A cigarette ember ignited the place and then they were too drunk to do anything but pound on the door. Poor Mrs. Carter called me and I rushed over with the master keys. We went in and doused the flames just in time. I tell you what, if it wasn't that Mr. Johnnie's such a good mechanic. I would—but you have to teach the lower classes restraint. Have to raise them up, you know?"

"What does this—."

"You know," he said, cutting me off, and leaning against the door frame, his fingers reaching just inside the apartment. "I did want to ask if you could do

something for me. The neighbors are complaining about the arguments. I don't mean to pry, it's none of my business, but since the tenants are complaining, I have to say something." He smiled as if to soften the blow, but I felt the shame of public criticism cutting through my soft evening like a quick blade.

"Doug, thank you. We'll keep it down." I said good night and shut the door. I lit a stick of incense, watching the snaky trail of smoke slip outside into the Sunnyvale courtyard. The sounds of the evening entered the room like intruders: the talk from next door, music from across the courtyard, the Doppler wail of a passing ambulance.

I dozed off, waking in a sweat when Naima pushed the door open. Hours must have passed. The orange glow of the incense stick was now dark. She nearly fell over me as she entered, exclaiming as she caught her balance.

"Come on, man." She looked down, and said, "What happened to you?"

I was groggy and slow to find my thoughts. After a few seconds, she shrugged off the bag she was carrying and went into the bedroom. I followed her.

"Doug came by to say that the neighbors were complaining." I tried emptying my statement of anything that Naima might consider judgmental. But my words seemed hollow, even to myself.

Naima was transfixed, her eyes suddenly expanded, saying, "You see! You see! I hate all these fucking white people! I hate them! Fuck you!" she said, shouting at the window. She took off her shirt and standing in a bra and panties,

a shaft of light from a neighbor's balcony striking across her face, she said, "You know what happened tonight?"

She was a silhouette against the window and I said, "What?"

"Some white woman called me a 'nigger.'"

I didn't know what to say, couldn't say what I should have said—"Oh, baby. I'm so sorry."—just stood there with my mind whirling. Would she lose her temper again? Would she throw something against the walls? Would she take off towards the neighbor's and beat them with a skillet?

"What happened?"

"Some old white bitch didn't like how much time I was taking cutting her fucking banana cream pie."

"I'm sorry, baby."

She sank into the bed, and sighed, "I hate this country."

"What are you gonna do? It is what it is," I said, hoping to ease her pain, but instead she stood straight up and pointed at me.

"See," she said, her voice sharp, "that's the kind of racist shit I'm talking about. You might as well have called me a 'nigger' too."

"What? You must be joking."

"Come on, Isaac. I can't always be your mother, explaining this shit to you. What you just said is what keeps racism alive. That it just quote 'Is what it is.' That everything is as it should be."

"No, no. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying for your own sanity, you should—."

"Oh, now you're gonna' tell me about sanity? Please, Isaac. You ain't no expert. You're just Anxiety Jones, who smoked a little dope. The LSD is what really fried your brain, and that ain't addictive, stupid."

My insides swirled with emotion. But I couldn't speak.

"And," Naima continued, "you don't know what racism is when it smacks you in the face. Why do you think people are complaining about us? Why?"

I wanted to run, to run away in my mind somewhere else. to make my fantasy world a real refuge where I wouldn't have to find a solution to Naima's dilemma, to my dilemma, the predicament of our blended life. *Please*, I prayed.

"Isaac, what the fuck are you doing?!!! You can't just check out like that! I won't have it! I want a man," she said, her face taut with emotion. "A man, Isaac. Someone who can speak his mind."

I imagined myself saying, "Let them all go fuck themselves. You don't need to give those kind of people a second of your time." But I was afraid. I wondered if our neighbors could hear us. My throat became sore. I felt a surge of stomach acid spread up into my chest. I wanted a glass of water.

"Man, fuck this shit," she said, stomping into the kitchen, pulling out a knife and walking back to me, the tip of the heavy blade pointed straight at my throat.

"Whoa, Naima!"

"Oh, now I got your attention?"

"Naima, Naima. It's okay. I'll talk. I'll talk. Put the knife down."

"No, start talking first."

"Okay, okay. Talking."

She jabbed the knife toward my eyes and said, "Don't fuck around."

"Sure," I said, my mind now a razor, my thinking focused to a momentary precision. "I'm amazed that you're being treated this way. That that awful woman called you that awful name."

"Yeah, go on." She brought the knife down to her side.

"And I said what I said because I wanted to comfort you, not because I wanted to dismiss you, or the racism you experienced, and sweep everything under the rug—."

"But that's what you did when you said, 'It is what it is.'"

"Yeah, you're right."

"You can't do that. If you want this relationship to work—and interracial relationships are the hardest, the hardest relationships to be in—if you want it to last, you have to be able to talk about shit. Imagine if we had kids. What would you tell your daughter—who would be black, by the way—if she came home with the same story? If she came home saying, 'Daddy, Billy called me a 'nigger' at school today.' What would you do?"

"It's just that I want things to be so good for you, I want so much for you to get a fair shake out there in the world."

"Whatever. Man, you need to grow up. The world is hard. People are assholes. And life's a bitch with a g-string. You should know that. But you don't, because you spend all your time reading. Get your head out of those fuckin' books and gain some real knowledge."

"Can I just rent your brain?"

"No," she said, the edge in her voice gone, her rage shifting to gentle repartee in an instant.

51.

Bipolar: A Disorder of Mood

The following week the Santa Anas started blowing, the heat sweeping down from the high desert, over Mt. Baldy, down the Tujunga channels, the rills and woodland valleys of Northridge and North Hills, over the Santa Susanna Road, the old stagecoach trail above Chatsworth, through the long corridor where the 101 shepherds carloads from Universal Studio City into Hollywood, somewhere along the way, a careless hiker on a little used trail along Mulholland Drive lighting a sticky bowl of Mary J, shaking out the match, and tossing the smoky stick onto the rocky gravel, where the wind picked it up and carried over a ranch house, an opalescent pool of water, two blonde-haired teenagers floating in pink bliss while the match nicked a sweep of witches brew, that orange creeper omnipresent in the late September chaparral, fire and oxygen and dry fiber quickening what was once a solid hillside of Mediterranean flora into a liquid, vaporous inferno.

Fortunately, the high pressure kept the air blowing west towards Malibu. Naima and I took the surrounding news hysteria as an opportunity to stay indoors.

On a Friday night, Naima and I were at it again.

"I apologize, baby," I told her.

"Why? For—."

"Because I feel like you—."

"Stop!"

"But—."

"Isaac!"

"But!"

"Stop!!" She picked up the glass she was drinking from. "Do you want me to throw this at you? Because I really feel like doing it."

If I looked at the glass and not at her eyes, I had some control over her behavior. So I stared at the glass, the dark red of the cranberry juice in the lights-out room, the flicker of tv news dancing across the pocked, machine blown vessel. I stared at it and then stole a glance at Naima, saw her face tight, her eyebrows raised.

Suddenly, the television audio seemed preternaturally relevant. The newscaster, her thirtysomething singsong voice trying on the gravity the situation seemed to call for, said, "In the hills above Malibu, Tom and Berta Stoub have lived in their house for thirty years. As you can see from the photos on their walls, they have lived a full life, complete with four children and thirteen grandchildren, Arabian horses, and a world class Model T collection. They have survived the Northridge earthquake. The floods of '84. But if you look behind me, you can see the huge black firestorm that is bearing down on the Stoub's paradise. Will their beautiful home and all these precious memories survive—."

"Isaac," Naima said, still holding the glass, "You don't listen. It's impossible to have a conversation with someone who doesn't—."

"But I thought you wanted me to be a man?"

She pulled her arm back, the red juice sloshing over the side of the glass and spilling onto the carpet, the top of the glass poised at a slight angle above her head. "Isaac!" she yelled. "You are an idiot!"

The glass. The glass.

"Shut up!" she said. "For one moment, can you shut the fuck up?!" I looked at the red juice fall in an arc and fan out on the carpet, the pattern in the pale rug, a fierce and inchoate animal, a crow on fire over the blazing mountains. When I looked up, Naima said, "Isaac, how are you ever going to know who I am if you don't listen to what I'm saying? How can you call yourself a writer if you don't know how to be with people?" She righted the glass, only a quarter of the tumbler having emptied. She still wouldn't set it down. I thought about explaining why I didn't listen, about my father's shyness, my mother's hysteria. About my escape into the room with the concupiscent pages. But I kept silent instead. "I mean, I must be willing to change. I didn't run and get a knife this time."

"I don't care what you do to me."

"What? Then you're stupider than I thought." Her mouth fell open, she shook her head and said, "You are not that fucked up, man. You did not have it that hard." I started to cry but she said, "Uh-uh. Don't do that." So I stopped. I could stop crying on demand. My sadness floated on the surface of a greater insecurity. "Don't start crying like a little bitch." She shook her head, her lips twisted in what I assumed was contempt, her eyes soft and searching. "You did not have it that hard, man. Did your mother wake you up in the middle of the

night with her hands around your throat? Did you see your sister get raped? Did you? Have you seen someone's head get blown off?"

"All that stuff. Did that happen to you?"

"Man, you do not listen. Why should I repeat myself? I have work to do. I'm trying to get out of this dump, get out of community college. I want to go to a UC and get a science degree. I'm not gonna be so dumb as to get a degree I can't do anything with."

She sat on the couch and I walked into the bathroom where I sat, silenced. There was a copy of *Anna Karenina* on the floor. I picked it up and it fell open to a passage near the end. The first lines of the chapter read: *There are no conditions to which a person cannot grow accustomed, especially if he sees that everyone around him lives in the same way.*

Naima stood at the door and said, "Isaac, do you think I might be bipolar?"

I looked up and said, "What would that mean, sweetie?"

She put her finger to her chin, and thought for a moment, and then she said, "That I have a mood disorder. That my moods are erratic."

"Maybe. If it is true, we're really screwed. I mean, if you're bipolar, and I'm Anxiety Jones, what will our kids be like?"

52.

Inspiration: Sam and Ebony, A Short Narrative

"David," I said. "Naima's going to a psychiatrist. When she gets violent, it's so hard not to run."

"I know it, man. I know. I've been married thirty-five years. My wife's been thr-r-rough the r-ringer with me. I was a bad cat. Orgies and shit. S-s-s-she's bipolar, too."

"Really. How weird."

"S-s-so you just have to know how to r-r-relax. The s-steps will help you do that."

"Man, I need the steps."

"We'll work them. In time. What about your s-s-sex addiction? How are you doin'?"

"Really well. When I ain't using time and energy for that, it goes elsewhere. Maybe that's why Naima and I are fighting so much more."

"Maybe. S-s-s-sometimes a little argument can be cleansing, too."

"So how are you? What are you up to?"

"Oh, I'm wr-r-riting a book with Ar-r-retha right now."

"Wow. That must be—."

"S-she's a different kind of lady. Man, to be honest, I think this one is going to be terrible. S-she is one difficult diva. It's been a power s-s-struggle ever since I s-s-started workin' with her. But s-s-she's the Queen of Soul, so."

Maybe I was looking for a father-figure, maybe I just wanted a big brother. Whatever the truth, David inspired me, and the next day I purchased a brand new, unmarked zebra-print Mead Composition journal and wrote the following story:

New Love, Old Story

i.

The black fan blew air across my hairy legs and through the tight braids of your hair. We're in the midst of a heat wave, the temperature nearing one hundred degrees. There is a fire burning somewhere to the east, and the air is full of ash and dirt and dust and drifting debris; sometimes it is a struggle just to breathe. This place, woodsy Boulder Creek, is so intimate, tucked high above the emerald waters of Monterey Bay. These Santa Cruz mountains are a rumpled blanket of redwood hills rolling in a heavily scented sheet of green triangles to the blue horizon.

Our home is a little redwood cottage on the San Lorenzo River. On either side, redwood needles carpet the ground with a dense and prickly brown. Our small house is filled with charts of the body, the Krebs Cycle, a huge poster of the periodic table I cribbed from the ad agency, the word "fahrfenugen" emblazoned across the bottom. There is also a black light poster of Bob Marley. I love smoking pot, firing up "Natural Mystic" on the mp3 player, and staring in the dark at the crazy green and red lines coming off the poster. You are a graduate student in molecular biology; I know you don't

think spacing out is fun. You say it kills sperm. I have to quit smoking dope, again. Soon. Go to 12-step or something. God, how I don't want to hold hands with some stranger and say the Serenity Prayer!

That last paragraph was one hundred and fifty-seven words! You know Ebony, I really can *open up if the conditions are right. Like this afternoon. We spent the whole afternoon in the dark, the curtains drawn, reading by candlelight, surfing the net. It is a darkness like the deep ocean, and we floated in a delightful solution, dipping into various books (*The Aeneid, Gray's Anatomy, Life Is Hell: Hell Is Hell*).*

There is an election coming.

You say, There's no difference between the candidates. Just two saltines, two crackers looking to rob some poor people.

I object, and reach for your Aunt's Bible, *the phrase 'Spread the Bread' written in green marker along the spine of the pages. I open to* II Corinthians 13, *and threaten to conk you on the head with it.*

Outside, even the stellar and scrub jays keep their screeching and clacking to an intermittent squawk. The moments stretch out like taffy, but eventually I return your friendly fire, saying, Baby, your children will be crackers, unless you divorce me.

Oh, please. Our children will be black. Haven't you heard of the one-drop rule?

I have, of course, heard of such atavistic policies. But I ask you, hasn't that played itself out?

Are you crazy?

I never stand a chance in these discussions. You are always perched on the right side of race. And while I am sometimes an ally in the struggle for minority empowerment, it seems that usually, according to you, I am a soft apologist for white supremacy, which you refer to as 'stupidity.' And sometimes, I even play the villain.

In life or in art, connections must occur; this hope do I treasure. You know my background, dear. But let me sketch it for you again. You know how I like to perform.

A SHORT HISTORY OF UNKA SAM

From a suburban childhood filled with the silent upswing of expectations, the sanctification of optimism—to the bittersweet harmonies of interracial marriage—I have come quite a ways from the West San Fernando Valley. Sometimes, perhaps inappropriately, I even feel like an outcast. A secular Jew, that spinning stereotype, is not unfamiliar with historical margins or with the bloody myths that inspire individuals who walk with the rubbed-out Star of David, a palimpsest of trouble on their breast pocket. (Jesus Christ, man! What's with the metaphors. You're not even a real Jew! You don't even know what day Young Kipper is! Suck it up! Say what you mean!)

END OF HISTORY.

You respond to my comment about the one drop rule, saying, Are you crazy? If you have one drop of black blood in you, you black. And therefore, Big Head, your children will be black.

You and I have been together some time now. Against the odds. Against the grain of homogenized couples whose firewood bonds crackle and burn in the bonfire of divorce, the rule of the age. (Geez, I've got to cut out the bullshit. Who am I trying to

please? Remember the old masters: Pare your fingernails, young man! Back, back!) Things fall apart. Sure, like any other couple, you and I have had our conflicts; you have a bit of a temper, and early on in our relationship, when we did fight, I wasn't always prepared for the intensity of your rage. I shut down, I know. I shut down a lot. I couldn't speak. I was afraid that my anger was better left unexpressed, that the way I saw the world was fundamentally wrong.

I touch your ribs, where you have a funny spot, and you say, Stop! You slap my hand away, your face full of mischief.

I say, Big Head? You can't talk about my head like that. Shoot, if your head were any smaller, it wouldn't be there.

The memories keep tumbling into my mind; when I start writing one down, I remember two more. The time you went to Ross to get some socks and held the door for some wrinkly faced white woman who muttered, Oh, I am so weary of black people ... *Growing up in the barrio, not the ghetto, and the Latino kids who ganged up on you and poured milk on your head, yelling* Whitey! Whitey! Whitey!

No, baby. I'm not saying you're stupid. No, no. Cupid, maybe. But not stupid. You think I'd hang out with a stupid person? Obviously, you're bright, all that higher level cooking you do at the lab.

Cooking? You comparin' biochemistry with cooking?

You reach over and dig your fingers into my ribs, hunting for the funny bone, and I let you find it. We fall into each other, and I return your tickles with my own, in the spot you find irresistible, touching the soft lobes of your ears, kissing your sweet skin—oh, how I love your warm scent; I want to live in the soft nest of your neck forever, but suddenly, you say, Stop! Stop! Please stop!

Say Uncle Sam is King!

Chunky Flim Flam is a Wing Ding!!

No, that's not the right answer! Say Uncle Sam is King!

Chunky Flim Flam is a Wing Ding!! You are overcome with delight, so full of laughter you can't even speak, and you laugh uncontrollably. You are doubled over with glee, letting out high-pitched cries. You are laughing so hard that finally, you fart.

Ewww, I say.

I let you go free. I sit up and reach for the can of deodorizer and spray liberally, pretending the can is an out-of-control firehose.

Aww. It wasn't that bad, you tell me.

I stand up and announce, The danger has passed. People of the United States, you can come out of your holes now.

I imagine I am Poe's famous black-feathered raven, and I let out a great, barbaric yawp even screechier than our neighbors, the squaw jays, crying, Freedom is on the march, squaaawwwwwkkkkkk! Freedom is on the march, squaaawwwwwkkkkkk!

We are drunk with joy, and we slide off the couch, pulling the green pillows with us, finally settling down into a gentle silence. I feel so good inside.

I cup your face and bring you towards me. Once again, I see that your face isn't black at all (Oh, how useless words can be), but brown, and not uniformly brown, but a dark mahogany along your arms, becoming caramel along your belly, and even pink (just like mine) at the soles of your cracked feet.

Outside, the fire burns on, turning the hills into an unrolling skein of grey thread, choking the very air. But you and I, Ebony, I think it is safe to say, we are very happy.

The room is dark, but my heart, the very oxygen in my bloody veins, surges with an irrepressible light.

I move against your face and gaze at your lips, so full of revelation. Your eyes sparkle. I kiss you, and I say, I love you.

ii.

And on the second day …

This heat is killing me. I spend all day driving around looking to buy a new porcelain top for our toilet. I must say, I have a talent for destruction. I have dropped the phone in a sink full of dirty dishes. I have tripped over a box of paper clips and planted my skull into the sharp edge of a counter top, sending me to the emergency room for stitches. I know, I am an oaf.

So perhaps you weren't surprised when I broke the toilet. The details are unimportant; that careless flip of the seat, some forgotten irritation. The point is the top of the darn thing cracked, a sheer fracture that split the white rectangle into three smaller pieces. So I go to the local hardware store, but they only sell entire toilets. Well, I don't

want to spend the extra money, and even if I did, I don't know the first thing about installing it. You'd have to do it, and, thereby, increase my sense of incompetence. So I point my car towards Silicon Valley and journey, not unlike the Crusaders, for a Holy Grail. (Oh Lord, if you're going to make an allusion, don't compare yourself to such an open-minded group. Discriminate, man!)

But no one sells toilet seats. Not Orchard. Not Ace. Not even Home Depot. Sure, I could purchase a computer powered Italian marble shitter that flushes on voice command and keeps track of how many times we take a piss, but a simple toilet top? I am, as they say, shit out of luck. (Now, this is writing!)

So I drive home along woodsy Highway Nine, the old lumber road up into the Santa Cruz Mountains, the soughing redwoods and oaks admonishing me.

The fire is burning through the north part of the range, about ten miles away from the highway. But the wind is blowing south, and the air is thick with smoke. I close the window and tattoo the steering wheel with my thumbs as I listen to Lee Morgan's <u>These Are Soulful Days</u>. *I focus on the drummer, Billy Higgins, whose polyrhythmic line has a sweet melodic quality that seems to massage the tension out of my chest. I start to feel a little better.*

When I walk in the house, you are on the phone. The television is on, but muted, the monosyllabic captions from some MTV reality show flickering across the screen. The beige curtains are drawn.

I grab two tall glasses, tumble four big cubes of ice into each one, and pour you and me some iced tea. I walk into the living room, and flop my raggedy body on the couch. You get off the phone and ask me about the toilet.

They didn't have one?

Nope. I guess no one ever breaks the top of the toilet. You have to break the whole thing to show up on the radar.

You need a shit storm or something.

Yeah. A whole storm front of piss and shit.

Fans are our sole source of relief from the heat, and you have arranged all five of ours around the room like some tribal ritual. I like being tribal. Once again, the fan blows cool air across my skin, across the little pools of iced tea that shake in the breeze, across your sweet face, and my anger begins to subside.

But you need to talk. You are irritated. You start to complain about your friend, Yolanda.

You say, Man! Yolanda is getting on my damn nerves!

I know your passion is, on the surface, diametrically opposed to my own obsession with the charged lyric fragment: my dissertation is called "Coleridge, Opium, and the Narcologic of Kubla Khan," while you study the relationship between what the poets call "love" and the mu-opiod receptors in the brain. And sometimes I wonder if your scientific expertise—the long hours struggling with the twenty four progressions of integral calculus, the various permutations of the benzene-ring, answering your Quantum Mechanics homework question: What physical requirement forced the existence of Ei-

genvalues on us? Science! What has all this problem-solving done for you, my dear? Has it only made the attempt to solve your social dilemma more difficult to bear? Is education a bitter apple?

You say, Yolanda thinks I'm just supposed to hang out with her, give her the answers to homework, go to church with her—all because I'm black. I feel smothered! You know? And the Minority Research Program advisor tells me that I should be grateful Yolanda is my friend. Man, she gets on my damn nerves! She's loud, always runnin' up to everybody and trying to introduce me to her black friends, saying 'Hey y'all, this is Ebony. You know, we got to stick together in this mug.' I don't care about them guys she introduces me to. I already have a clumsy husband, you know?

Isn't his name Bond or something?

Don't be cute now, Sam. I'm serious.

I say, You know, we need to fill out these absentee ballots. I guess you're not voting for president?

You glare at me.

What!? I say, knowing exactly what your expression means.

What? you say, with a wisp of sarcasm. Sam, you know you can't just fuckin' do that. Don't you even care about what I'm going through? Don't you even care if I'm upset?

I say, No, no, baby. I care.

No you don't or you wouldn't change the subject.

I lean back into the couch, my hands in my lap, my feet under the wooden coffee table. I look at the television. It is still muted, the captions from the reality show read: Like whatever. *My mother doesn't even know that I drink. And I'm not going to tell her. Anyway, she wouldn't say anything. Just stick me in rehab. Like I'm one of her Beamers you send to the shop for repairs.*

I turn to you and say, Baby, I do care. I know you rely on Yolanda. That you need her. But I also know that she can be very annoying.

You are in your pajamas, wearing the soft red cotton bottom and light blue top with the tiny square imprints of Minnie Mouse. But your face is fierce, a slash. My heart pounds. I think quickly, hunting for the right answer. Finally I say, What if you just ignore her?

Ignore her? No, that's not a good solution. There is no way to ignore her. She won't let me ignore her. Besides, there aren't really any other black people at school. And sometimes I need a break, you know? From wearin' the mask so y'all won't get uncomfortable.

You stop speaking, and I nudge your shoulder. You crack a smile and your face is beautiful.

The mask!!, I say, hissing in mock horror. No, no! Not the mask! Not the mask!

Shut up. You know what I mean.

Not really.

Everyday I'm black. White people don't give us a day off. You have it different. You can choose to be anything you want. You can blend in with the rest of y'alls pasty

faces. No one's reminding you of your race by the way they act. White people, y'all's body language, the way you look at a person, reminds us of who we are.

How 'bout them apples?

The Bible has been lying on the table since yesterday, open to Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians. *You pick it up, and bonk me on the head with it. Online, I find a distant college station in Nairobi, one that plays wild Afro-Asian electronica, the rhythm making us both dance. I find a groove. I see you let yourself go. Jumping, saying Oh! Oh! Oh! and stamping your feet and saying it again and moving your shoulders and saying it again! and shaking your hips and saying Oh! Oh! Oh! again.*

Somehow we come up with a strange renaming of our lovely mutt, our collie/chocolate lab mix, changing her elegant name, "Cocao" (you insisted on the French spelling), to the august "Rococo," an ancestral nod to our Italian ancestry (of course) chanting, "Rococo, Rococo, Rococo, Uh! Rococo, Rococo, Rococo, Uh!," and rumbaing across the hardwood floors until we collapse on the couch overcome with elation.

We fall into the hot bed, and we begin kissing, slowly and tenderly exploring the soft curve of each other's lips, the sweet rise of you.

My heart pounds, my whole body is alive for you. We begin to make love. I am inside you and I look into your face; you are swathed in beads of joy, your head crowned with a garland of stars. I begin to kiss your neck. Oh, how I love you.

Get off!! Get off!!! Get off!!! you cry, suddenly pushing me with all your might, turning toward the wall and letting out a long, unbroken sob. It is a flashback. Oh, how stupid I am! Oh, why did I kiss you there!? I know better!

I comfort you as best I can, saying, Baby, it's me. It's me. It's me.

You sob uncontrollably. Your whole body shaking, shaking as if were it to continue much longer you might break into pieces. Tears stream out of your eyes and run down your cheeks.

I whisper, my voice a mixture of tenderness and worry, Oh, sweetie. It's me. It's me. It's me.

But you continue to cry, your voice coming from some deep realm, a sound like a long thin rope twisting down through a tree, a deadness hanging at the end. It is the sound of death and the fear of death. You sob and I feel my heart melt, liquefy in a quick swirling twist that loosens my gut and sends sharp waves of hot acid into the back of my throat.

I rub my hand along the back of your neck while your body shakes, and you cry, Oh, no, no, no, no ...

Your gasps become a rolling cough; your agony is a hand in my chest, gripping my heart for a purchase.

Then, it is over. You open your eyes. They are wild and search the ceiling. You straighten your arms and legs with a furious, lurching movement.

Shhh, shhh, I tell you. Baby, it's okay. It's okay. It's me, Sam.

Whatever agony, whatever remembered image of violation having run its course, finally, you become calm. You roll out of bed and go into the bathroom. I follow, leaning against the doorjamb feeling paper-thin, feeling less substantial than a reed in the river wind. I am your husband, your lover, your best friend--but right now, I feel like I have let you down, again. In my mind's eye, I see the actual rapist—your mother's friend, Eddie, climbing through the bedroom window to come upon you while you sleep. I know you must have been so afraid. I see his hands on your throat, his mouth against your ear, whispering Keep your fuckin' gap shut if you want to live, bitch-- *I see the white nurse at the hospital roll her eyes and tell the policeman that accompanied you,* We don't take her kind here-- *I see a rush of images out of America's history: the Ku Klux Klan standing in a circle in a hardwood forest clearing, a white-hooded ring around a burning cross. Billie Holiday's voice swinging in the air like a frayed rope* ... The scent of magnolia sweet and fresh ... Then the sudden smell of burning flesh ... *I see a 19th century white Southerner, drunk, and full of lechery. And I see myself as a pale, bearded man in over-alls, all elbows and dirt, a man with a flimsy wooden shack, and chicken coops, and a cabinet full of home-brew. I stumble through the hot August night out into the slave quarters and pull a little girl from her sleep.*

You turn on the tap, soak a yellow rag, and wipe yourself off. You drop the rag on the counter and climb back in bed. I follow, sliding into the cotton sheets, seeing you turn away from me, and I hold you until you fall asleep.

Which is a matter of minutes. And I know this sounds horrible, I know I'm a jerk, but, god darn it, I am annoyed at you. Shit, after five years, sex is less frequent than

those first passionate days. When it happens, it almost feels like a gift. Many times, it doesn't go so well: you arouse me, fondling my genitals, but fall asleep while I sway in the breeze. Or I touch your erogenous areas, but make some clumsy move with my nail and you tell me to stop. And sometimes, after a failed intimacy, my face turning away from you, my eyes gazing into the wall and the shadows, I feel so hungry for your touch, I feel like I could eat my own fingers. I grit my teeth, and lean into the darkness, eyes wide open, feeling the dark air stir with the slow rise and fall of your breath.

Now, my shame becomes frustration, becomes resentment. I can't sleep. I get up and read Corinthians *again. Finally, I tire and as I lie back in bed I repeat the words,* Love never fails. Love never fails. *Again and again I say these words to myself until finally I dream. I dream of the ocean, of a battered wooden pier, pilings washed away by some forgotten deluge. A log cabin perched on the end of the wooden pier, man's domain. We are inside. Waves crash through the door. You and I sit on logs around a black pot, stirring blue jay feathers, a peg-and-ball model of the hydrogen molecule, and Paul's* Epistles. *The pages are soaked through with broth, but the letters glow like hot coals as we blow, you and I, across the surface.*

I wake in the middle of the night with an incredible thirst. I am so parched my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. I have been crying in my sleep, and the tears have dried my eyelids shut. I cannot see. I stumble into the bathroom, feeling the bed, the wall, the doorjamb, the bathroom wall, the sink, and the cold-water knob. I splash water on my face, and the brittle film of tears breaks. I can see again! I turn off the tap, go into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water.

I fall back asleep immediately.

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53.

Big Trouble

Winter descended on the Miracle Mile with shadows and a 60-degree chill. The flow of prospective tenants slowed, but elderly Russians, ignorant of the seasonal slow-down, relentlessly accosted me in clunky syllables for "spe-cial ap-pli-ca-tions." They entered the office, eyes downcast, hats in hand, shifting from one foot to the other, seemingly afraid that KGB lurked in the corners of Sunnyvale's ecru lobby, poised to drag them back to their stinking gulags.

One day, towards closing, on a leafy, shadowy winter day quite like any other, at the end of a long week, toward the close of another cold December, the holidays coming, Ms. Goldman, aka the Ice Queen, the short, stout elderly Russian in three-thirty-four walked into the office. That day, Doug had left early and I was left to man the boat. I was tired, and ready to go home. The Ice Queen wore a darkblue, floral one-piece bathing suit. As the water dripped onto the office carpet, she stomped her left foot on the ground, stuck out her finger and leaned towards me, saying, "This pool is like ice!"

"But Ms. Goldman," I calmly said, "I've told you before, the pool's temperature is kept at 75 degrees year round."

She shook her head. "No. I tell you. The pool is like ice. I put my body inside and I come out ice cube." I could see a trace of rouge on the cheeks of her wrinkled face.

"Ms. Goldman, it can't really be that cold."

"Oh, you Americans! You think everybody like what you like! Selfish. Feh!"

She raised her head in contempt, turned and walked out, muttering, "Capitalist pig."

That was it. A great wave of fury rose up in me. I thought, *Well, well. I'm a capitalist. I'm a communist. Whatever. They can all go drown themselves in the Stolichnaya River. I am through with this job. Through with sales. With the Russians or Ukrainians, Slavs, Belorussians, whatever the hell they are. They are old people, damn it, and they infuriate me with their needs. Oh, screw it! I'm going to run across the street and jump in the ooze. If I can't swim in sales, then I'll sink with the rest of the fossils.* And that's when it hit me. *No, I thought. I'll evict them! I'll evict them all!!* Of course I knew I wouldn't get away with it, but I'd put a scare in them they hadn't felt since the days of Josef S. I was sick to death of old people and Russians and all the shit I had to make happen, which just happened anyway.

I sank my head in my hands and wished I might enjoy the bliss of moderate alcoholism. But I was painfully sober and looking down at my feet wasn't going to help. I tried to meditate, but the door opened and I looked up to see what I thought must be the most beautiful woman in the world. She wore a short pink pastel skirt suit with a yellow daisy in her beautiful dirty blond hair.

"Hello," she said, with the suddenly sweet, swallowed vowels of Eastern Europe.

When I shook her soft hand, I didn't want to let go.

But she took her hand back and I said, "How can I help you?"

"My name is Tatiana Tedorov and I wish to see an apartment."

"Great. I think I can certainly find something appealing for you. This is a beautiful place to live. I, myself, live here." I couldn't take my eyes off her damn calves. "Please sit down," I said, motioning her to a chair more out of self-preservation than courtesy. I was quite sure that ogling the prospects was not a good sales technique. Recovering my decorum, I said, "First, please tell me what kind of budget you're working with."

"I am thinking about your top apartments. A view of the park."

"Great," I said and grabbed the keys to our best vacancy.

When I swung open the door, I could see she was stunned. The scud of clouds on the western horizon shot through the setting sky in a faceted cascade of pink and violet. The sound of laughing children and barking dogs rose joyously from the park. The lights of the city were just coming on, and in that moment, I felt glad to be there. I slid the balcony window open, letting in the cool breeze.

Tatiana was effusive. "This is so beautiful. I must have it for my mother."

Her mother was a new part of the equation. Not again. I shot back, "I thought this was for you."

"Oh, no," she said, smiling broadly. "I want the special application. For my mother, Anna."

"No, no, no!" I said, all my affection suddenly gone. Shaking, I hissed, "If you wish your mother to be considered for a reduced rent unit, and she is se-

lected, she will have an apartment assigned to her." A crepuscular gloom descended, and I shut the window.

Tatiana glared at me. "No, this is not acceptable," she said. "This is not fair. She should get a small, ugly apartment in back of building?" Her stance was firm, shoulders thrown out. Lips pursed. Hands gripped in consternation.

"But those are the rules," I hastily answered, herding Tatiana out the door, and letting it slam with a thud.

I showed her out of Sunnyvale, closed the office, and went up to my empty apartment. Naima was out and had left a note on the fridge, "Went to visit my mom. Be back later. Love, Me."

I pulled out my journal and began writing the letter that would change everything.

Dear Russians,

You are hereby notified that your tenancy is herewith abolished. Your constant need for special treatment has henceforth reached its bitter culmination. I will no longer tolerate your transgressions against our rosy Weltanschauung. That's it. You're out. All of you. Every last vodka-stained Stalinist. Pack your shit and hit the road!

Yours very truly,

Isaac Abramowitz

P.S. Do you feel special now? Hahahahahahahaha!!!

In my delusion, I admired how I had nailed the tone. This was putting my writing skills to good use. This was what my father meant about making shit happen. This was what Naima meant about having a backbone. I headed back down to the office to type it up.

It was dark when I got there, the streetlights obscuring all but an illuminated string of concrete halos.

I punched a few keys of the electric typewriter, admiring the hard thwack! of each letter hitting the page, but stopped after the first few spastic lines. I pulled the paper out and scrutinized what I had done. *Oh, heck,* I thought, *this isn't helpful. This is screed, this is pure bile, this is stupidity.*

The elevator opened and a few people exited the carpeted cab, heading around back towards the mailboxes and the parking lot. Suddenly, someone entered the office.

I stifled a groan and said, "Hi, Luis."

We all called him Mr. Boggle. Luis Gonzalez, second in command of the maintenance crew at Sunnyvale, to be fair, was as gentle as Mother Teresa. His very eyes twinkled. But talking to Mr. Boggle was like staring at a laundry machine: you could hear something spinning inside, but who knew what it was, let alone what it meant? You might stand outside the washer and direct the theme song from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, sledgehammer the side of the lavanderia with a six ton mallet, and set off a neutron bomb inside the soap dispenser, and still all the damn thing would do was spin.

"Mr. Isaac. I leave early."

"Luis, it's after seven. It isn't early."

"Yes, but I come late." He stood, holding a wool cap, and alternately looking from me to his feet.

"No problem, Luis. Of course." I didn't have any authority over him anyway. "Luis," I said, "You are a very honest man. It's nice to know people can still be like that."

"Thank you, Mr. Isaac. I go now."

Well, perhaps there was hope for mankind, I thought. I sat in the office for some time. The night had descended, and I watched the people come and go, their faces bright as they talked. I felt a little guilty about the letter, and I stood up, stuffed it in my pocket, and headed out of the office into the lobby where I called for the elevator.

But the good times dissolved in the fluorescent light when the elevator door opened and the Ice Queen, in fading blue pajamas, stared out at me like some kind of curse.

"Hello," she said, waving a finger.

I held the door for her, thinking she was leaving the building, but she said, "Please, I need to talk to you."

"Okay," I said, a little worried. I let the brass doors close and weary, ready to surrender to whatever might result from the Ice Queen's request, said, "Why don't I walk you back to your apartment?"

"Good. I would like to invite you. Do you drink tea?"

"Tea? Yes, that sounds quite nice. It is a bit cold tonight."

She was frail and leaned against my arm as we walked slowly to the dark south end of the complex. When we got there, she hunched over the door. "Oh, these locks," she said. "I do not like these locks." She finally got the key to work, and we went inside. The apartment seemed decorated from an earlier era. A silver samovar sat on a large oak dresser. A framed poster of the famous Byzantine ikon, the *Virgin Eleousa*, hung above an ornate red couch with a mahogany frame, grape clusters carved into the wood. I anticipated the worst, wondering if she had any ice sculptures of Solzhenitsyn.

"Sit here," she said, patting the couch, "and I will get the water started."

I sat down, the letter crumpling in my pocket.

A few minutes later, she brought me a steaming cup of tea, the porcelain painted with scenes of a rustic child piping on a recorder, his knee raised, birds hovering over his head.

"Das vedanya," I said. "That means 'Thank you,' right?"

"Well, not quite. But you are close."

I sipped the tea, which had a very complex flavor. Not English Breakfast, but akin to the heady notes of the good, dark teas.

"This is good," I said. *She actually drinks warm fluids*, I told myself.

"Thank you." She sat across from me, quiet, hovering over the steam pouring off her cup.

"Well, Ms. Goldman, what did you want to talk about?" She put the tea on the coffee table between us and brushed her lap with her hands.

After a few moments, she said, "This afternoon. The pool. I, I was wrong."

Surprised, I asked, "How were you wrong, Ms. Goldman?"

"The pool it was not cold. I just feeling—special. How you say?" She paused and then asked, "Spoiled?"

"Spoiled?"

"Well, where I come from, we have no pools. You might go to the water, to the Black Sea. But it is not how you say--fun?"

"Yes, fun."

"Yes, I do not like this. No one like it. It is very, very cold water."

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"I from Odessa, in Ukraine."

Suddenly, I felt an awful twist in my stomach. When Ms. Goldman mentioned her home town, the memory of all my East European Jewish ancestors who had escaped the Pale, the bloody pogroms, and worse, all at once, the enormity of my petty resentments flushed my face with red shame and a wave of nausea coursed through me. "Could I use your bathroom?" I asked.

"Of course. The door on the left."

Inside, I sat on the green-shag toilet seat cover and gathered my composure. I looked at the wall and the little window, the brushed plexiglass open just enough to feel a breeze. For the first time since I'd been at Sunnyvale it struck me how identical all the units really were. The shower. The chrome racking. The mirror. Everything was exactly the same.

When I returned, I sat back on the couch and asked her, "What's Odessa like?"

She shrugged, her eyelashes fluttering, and said, "Odessa very poor. Used be great city, great Ukraine sea port. Big ships, many jobs. Not now." She frowned, and continued, "Now is very bad. Very cold all the time. All the time."

History is an equalizer: what were once ocean floors become high mountains and then are ground down into sediment in the slow cycle of planetary evolution. Ms. Goldman, Luis Gonzalez: they had struggled so hard just to get to Sunnyvale. But I knew nothing of their struggles like I knew practically nothing about my own ancestors; like I knew practically nothing of Naima's struggles in this country. Ms. Goldman came from the place where my family had once lived. Somewhere, sometime, an unknown Ukrainian cousin who'd never made it to Ellis Island had probably rubbed shoulders against her in the market streets, picking up a fallen Sevastopol apple, exchanging a kind word.

I mumbled an apology.

She pushed me on the shoulder, and said, "No you be sorry. No be sorry for poor old Ms. Goldman. I am very happy here."

I knew a few fifty-dollar words, but they were worthless without an ability to connect with other people.

"Ms. Goldman," I asked, "Maybe you'd like to accompany me to the Tar Pits this weekend?"

"Isaac," she smiled, "so good. That is very good idea."

She walked me to the door. "Good night, Isaac," she said quietly. As I walked away, I could hear her humming through the walls. I reached in my pocket and threw the letter into the trash can by the elevator door.

Later that night, as I lay on the mattress next to Naima, I imagined what it must have been like for Ms. Goldman, for Dotty and my grandparents, for all my ancestors whose names I didn't know back in the Old Country. That night I dreamed I wandered along Odessan beaches, and as I walked, waves of black ooze sheeted across the shore, sending pieces of broken bones onto the glowing sand, ulnas and skulls shaped like the letters of some inscrutable alphabet. I reached a berm and came upon a circle of people. They were singing in some language I couldn't understand. I saw my father, and I wrapped my arms around his back and whispered into his ear. But my throat cracked and the only sound was the music playing off the sea.

When I awoke, I went outside to sit beside the mammoths. I could see Papa Mammoth, his trunk stretched to its limit, paralyzed in that last moment when he lost contact with his family, frozen in the agony of separation, a standing fossil. The rain started to fall and soon turned into a downpour that turned the ground to mud. I hurried back across the street and into Sunnyvale. I could see Doug inside the office talking to Ms. Goldman. She was shaking a letter in her hand. "This Isaac," she yelled, "he make big trouble when he write this." And that's when I headed back to my unit, and crawled into bed.

54.

Transition

I was fired and we were evicted.

In a carefully worded letter from Mr. Goldrich, Sunnyvale asked us to leave within 14 days.

"What are we going to do?" Naima asked.

"We're going to move. I'll find us a place. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying."

"Well, let's get out of here. I want to get out of here. Go for a walk."

We headed out of Sunnyvale and walked east on Wilshire, passing Kosher delis and office buildings, art nouveau cinemas and the Korean embassy. We walked block after block, cars whizzing by, palm fronds hanging in the limp, hot air like faded postage. The sun was bright and reflected off the glass buildings in a blinding flare. When I looked at the reflected image of Naima and me walking along the sidewalk, I thought we looked like an old couple.

We held hands, my thumb looped through her soft brown fingers. Her hands felt like the softest caress. She swung my hand back and forth in the air, and despite an uncertain future I felt … delightful.

"Naima, are you still considering marriage?"

"Maybe."

My heart leapt up at her easy ambivalence. Oh! Could I have won her back? Before I could ask another question, she asked one first. "What about kids,

Isaac? How are you ever going to be able to have kids if you can't deal with conflict between you and your woman? And how can you even be any kind of writer if you can't communicate? That's what always confuses me."

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I have some growing up to do. I am slowly learning about myself, about my defects of character—"

"Isaac, that's AA talk. Everybody has flaws. But what really eats at you? You need to start expressing those things at home. No use just going to meetings and telling those people. Talk about them with me. I'm the person who lives with you. I know you better than anyone else."

The next morning when I woke, Naima was out running. In my journal, I wrote: *There are things about Naima's personality that I really love. I see our marriage as a union of like-minded souls who are passionate about slightly different things. Yes, I am more comfortable curling up with Camus'* The Stranger *while she likes leafing through* The Journal of Microbiology. *But we both--*

Naima walked through the front door.

--We both enjoy each other's company so much. We are both ambitious. We love hiking in the woods. We love cooking and eating and staying up all night talking into the wee hours. Towards the end of Anna Karenina, *Tolstoy says, "there are no conditions to which a person cannot grow accustomed, especially if he sees that everyone around him lives in the same way."*

Naima asked me something I didn't quite hear. "Just a second, baby," I said, "I want to get this down on paper."

Tolstoy's observation comes just when Levin is at his worst in his young marriage to Kitty. It reminds me that conflict must occur between--

"Isaac! You need to put that book down and talk. You're always stuck between the pages. Life is out here. Or do you want to marry yourself?"

I think the theme of Tolstoy's book is that marriage entails the sacrifice of your personal desires for the frustration of you and your partner's desires. I think, reading is a symbol of--

"Isaac!" she yells. "See this is exactly what I'm talking about. What woman wants to be married to a distant man? And don't we have to pack?"

55.

Mr. Brown

Naima's father appeared out of the gauzy mist—she had not heard from him in several years—showing up at the front door in a faded suit, black-banded straw hat, and Kente scarf.

I opened the door and he hollered, "Ha ha! My son! My son!"

He held my shoulders and looked into my eyes, taking a good long stare at the man his daughter had hooked, and, perhaps finding me satisfactory, shook his head and said, "You gon' take good care of my baby. Yes sir."

"I will. I will, Mr. Brown."

"Yes, sir! Ha! Ha!" He saw Naima and waved his arms, shouting, "Ha! Ha! Baby! Baby! Baby! You come here and give yo' daddy a hug!"

Naima threw her arms around her father. She put her head against his shoulder, and his hands cupped her head. He kissed her there and, his voice now a hush, whispered, "My baby."

They held each other, rocking ever so slightly. I saw Naima look into his eyes and kiss his left cheek, covered with white stubble.

"Daddy," she said, "Where you been hidin'? You look good."

He laughed. His laugh was tremendous, and its power swept through his face, shaking his jowls and fluttering his eyelids. He rocked Naima a little more from side to side, then stepped back and straightened his scarf, a band of brightly striped colors. "Well, I've been busy."

"What you been doin', old man?"

"What have I been doin'?" he said, incredulously. "I've been doin' what I do. Goin' to church. Doin' my sketches for NASA. You know, President Clinton sent me a letter."

"Really?" Naima said.

"Yeah," he replied, shaking his head.

"Daddy, you didn't do no sketches for NASA."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Haaaa!!"

56.

The Times

I didn't find work for some time. We scraped by on Naima's paycheck and student loans and my unemployment insurance until, after three months, I was hired by the *Los Angeles Times*. They assigned me to the West Los Angeles division of Circulation, and I became the Sales Representative for a territory that ran the length and width of Hollywood, from La Brea on the west to Vermont on the east, Melrose to the south and Hollywood Boulevard to the north. The *Times* outfitted me with a Ford Ranger, a clipboard, a roll of twine, and a ring knife.

My route took me from the storied, thick-carpeted lobby of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, to the rough, graffitied parking lot of Playboy Liquors. I grew to like my job. I liked being outside. I liked the banter that I developed with the liquor and grocery store clerks. There were several long-standing newsstands in Hollywood, and the city felt like a strange ghosttown even though the streets were lined with tourists snapping pictures of the gold-plated, pink-marbled, star-shaped plates lining the sidewalk along Hollywood Boulevard, the Walk of Fame. I imagined Faulkner and Hemingway coming down the Boulevard from their rooms in the high-rise apartment buildings on Hollywood and Vine to purchase a *Times* at the newsstand, the blue fabric of the *Times* signage flipping in the breeze stirred up by the passing Packards and Dusenbergs.

By a quirk of fate, one of my accounts was in the same building as Summer Selwyn's agency. While I knelt in the shadows, throwing twine around

stacks of unsold papers, I saw Summer and her cronies pass through the halls, and I hid my face.

I worked in the Hollywood streets picking up forty pound bundles of paper that stained my hands with black newsprint, the rope I used to tie the stacks together raising hard calluses on my palms. I worked in the sun and the rain and all through the newspaper bonanza of the Clinton impeachment as junkies and runaways and prostitutes hung out along Hollywood Boulevard asking for handouts.

Then, the day after Christmas, the *Times* announced lay-offs.

I sat in my boss's office snowed under by cold medicine while the Director, a Human Resource Specialist, and a Security Guard, went over my Severance Papers.

The Director said, "Isaac, I hate to tell you this. But we've eliminated your position."

The cold medicine staved off the sniffles and the coughs, but it left my head in a cloud.

"It's nothing personal, Isaac. I like you as a person. You always go the extra mile. But the company had to look at a lot of factors. Strictly a business decision. You understand."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Maybe we can find you something somewhere else in the company. I'll ask Robert upstairs."

I left the room and walked past a line of people waiting to get the ax.

But I was re-hired. My new job was to handle all correspondence, email, and phone calls to the Publisher regarding Circulation matters. I became the Publisher's ambassador. Basically, I was to do a lot of apologizing.

Imagine an occupation where your entire purpose is to please. Where each workday is an exercise in selflessness. And it wasn't just kissing ass. No, no. In the grand scheme of things, I'll admit, newspapers don't mean a lot. Three quarters of them are ads, and they're not worth much more than a crappy rag after twenty-four hours. Still, ensuring that every *Times* subscriber got a clean, crisp paper every morning and when they didn't making sure they still wanted one the next day, well that's the foundation of the American dream right there: to get what you pay for, and not a penny less. My new job was to make that a reality. If your paper landed on your prize petunias, or sailed over your white picket fence and hit your fourteen-year old dog, Bert, and took out his one good eye, or worse, you'd be mad. You'd be pissed if it was raining Sunday morning--and not just a trickle, but a downpour of Biblical proportions (q.v. Genesis 6:17)--and you ran out to get the paper, to catch up on whatever you catch up on, and there it was, the five pound loaf of black and white cellulose prostrate in a puddle of muddy water, the headline--"Rain Hits Southland"--barely visible out of the brownish slime.

Face it, these things happen. And no matter how many times you voted for the Green Party; made love, not war; and counted to ten after your a-hole coworker Chip gave you a Melvin—you, even you, would lose your cool.

But I didn't. The *Times* V.I.P. Customer Service desk was perfect for a guy like me.

I settled into a routine, taking the subway from Hollywood and Vine to the Broadway exit, downtown. The Red Line, Los Angeles's newly constructed subterranean tunnel, only went eight miles from Hollywood to downtown. The ride was about thirty minutes, and the sometimes rattling, sometimes calm journey through the faulted layers of the Angeleno basin often sent my mind into distant places. A man heading for work, thinking about marriage and recovery and debt, and ending up reading *Moby Dick*, sympathizing with Ahab and his fury. Would I be a wandering wordsmith, a fungible clerk in a country of landlubbers, for the rest of my days?

Sometimes I put my head against the steel support poles and listened to people whisper and mumble and laugh at each other as the train screeched through the Vermont turn.

The newspaper was composed of three major divisions: editorial, advertising, and circulation. Circulation was everything the *Times* claimed it wasn't: massively corporate—a staggering oaf of bureaucracy, political in-fighting, and paper shuffles (forms, memos, emails—terrifically un-journalistic and inherently profit-seeking). If you were like me, a grunt on the third-floor just doing a job, a worker among workers, perhaps you felt a little like the slow-witted third cousin who does all the heavy lifting. I saw the advertising people always hurrying to and fro in Brooks Brothers suits with dollar signs spinning in their eye sockets. And once in a while, I would see the tired journalists creep up to the cafeteria

between the second and third floors to buy snacks and soda. I saw Patt Morrison and Al Martinez, even Jim Murray one late Sunday night, cleaning his thick-rimmed glasses. They seemed possessed by a clamoring passion for something they heard in the air, a haunting melody just out of earshot, guiding them towards some indistinct goal.

But if you were in Circulation, you were like me: a regular joe, a guy you could talk to, a guy who needed to use mostly one and two syllable words, who just wanted to clock in and clock out without stirring up any trouble.

During my lunch hours, I played basketball in sub-2, the second floor below ground. The underground was a cavernous place that stretched off into some unknown distance far beyond the limits of the aboveground building. It used to house the old printing press back in the '20's. Dark tunnels wound around in the gloom. Some said they stretched to every seat of power downtown, to City Hall, to the Courthouse, to the houses of finance on Bunker Hill where special messengers were sent with coded communiqués, lockboxes handcuffed to their wrists.

The air was dusty underground. When I showered after games of three-on-three, and H-O-R-S-E, and 21, the dirt ran off my body in thick brown rivulets.

Aboveground, the hallways were filled with *Times* archival material. Old front pages. Photographs. The original, iron press from 1888. The first floor contained much of the historical front page material: framed copies of newspa-

pers that went back into the 19th century, the headlines announcing: 'Clinton Impeached.' 'Reagan Shot.' 'Neil Armstrong Takes One Giant Leap.' 'Martin Luther King Assassinated.' 'Atom Bomb Dropped On Nagasaki, Japanese Surrender.' 'Lindbergh Baby Abducted.' 'Los Angeles: The City of the Future.'

Customer service was easy. I was a natural. On the phone, I could appease anybody with a cordial tone and a little bit of patience. Present me with any level of anger, a murderous rage even, and when I smiled into the headset that fortissimo voice would have no choice but to descend into reason's range. It got to be more than a technique for me. It became a spiritual act. A sort of transference. The more they yelled, the more I smiled. Eventually the customer got a discount, and the paper dodged a cancellation and maybe a lawsuit to boot.

I must admit, I became quite adept at transforming anger. I mean, I could handle the most irate person. Cursing was nothing to me. I had a steel ear, strong. They would holler, "This is such bullshit! You keep charging me for delivering papers to a house I sold in 1989!! Are you fucking fucked in the head? You muther fuck fuck fucking asshole!!!!" Oh, I loved it. It was child's play. Offer them a few weeks free service, commiserate, talk about the state of the nation. And blamo! they changed their tune. "Oh, thank you, thank you! I *really* do love the *Times*."

Most importantly, I got to write: department newsletters, letters to irate customers, formal e-mails to Consumer Activists from the local news stations acting on behalf of the *Times* subscriber suing because of the newspaper-stoning death of her potbellied pig.

The letters poured in, day after day. People supposed if they wrote to the Chairman, CEO, President--whoever was on the masthead—and if they put all their vitriol and pique and wounded dignity into a highly literate, obsessively polished epistle that took on a devotion to clarity of expression seldom obtained in any other part of their lives, and if they addressed their letter to the top, something surely would get done. But in reality, as soon as the Publisher's secretaries saw that the heavy bond, typewritten billet-douxs told a tale of delivery woes, the letter went straight through inter-office mail to my desk on the third floor.

As the proxy apologist for the Publisher, I crafted missives that were much more than form letters. These letters—embossed with the *Times* insignia, carbon copied to the Publisher himself--gave credence to the small voice in me whispering, "You can be a writer." Phrases like: "most concerned for your trouble" and "our sincerest apologies for any ill-considered action of one of our representatives" and "rest assured, your concerns are valued by the Publisher."

These letters became something of an inspiration.

One day, I received the following:

PLEASE, PLEASE forward this message to Robert the Agent for 7--- Beverly Boulevard. This morning the paper delivery person ran down our hallways and it sounded and felt like a mini-earthquake. The carrier must be 250

pounds. He shook the hallways as he ran and one condo owner reported to the management company that her husband nearly had a heart attack as it was a terrible jolt similar to an earthquake. PLEASE stop this person from servicing our building as it is detrimental to our health. We were woken at 6 AM. It is very hard to get back to sleep. Plus, I now have a giant headache from being awoken so suddenly. My blood pressure went sky rocketing as well. This person this morning trounced down the hallway like a 450 pound gorilla. Please send this person somewhere else far from our building. I have been notified that there were many calls concerning this today and they want this to stop or they are considering canceling their subscriptions. Please tell Robert, the Agent, to give this person another building to scare out of their wits.

Thank you, Gertrude Steinway

When I called Gertrude, she rambled on about the news, about Israel, about the President, about all the crooks in Congress. Then she remembered the driver, the 450 pound gorilla, and said that they had met the other morning, that she felt so bad for the poor man with three kids and a goat farm back in Guatemala, that she gave him $20 for his trouble.

Then there was the email. At first it was just a trickle. A few dozen every day. But then, as more and more people got online during the late '90s, the emails to the *Times* for simple circulation requests ("Stop the paper for delivery." "Start the paper again already. Don't you know we're home?") grew into hun-

dreds and hundreds of emails every day. But sometimes, Angelenos sent notes that weren't really suited for a reply from our 'Standard Response' folder.

Dear Sir,

I'd like to suggest an article looking into the effects of all the trash the trash trucks seem to lose while driving along the freeway; particularly the 91 east from the 110 freeway (Thursdays are amazing!!).

Sometimes I developed long correspondences with customers who had particularly thorny paper problems. The attorney who returned from three weeks at the World Court in The Hague to find a stack of newspapers announcing his absence lying in a small mound in his Culver City driveway. The Long Beach fisherman who sent in a series of clipped Cooking section pages, his precise red marks noting each and every grammatical error. The Fontana housewife appalled when, one morning just before dawn, she looked out her mullioned dining room window to see the delivery driver urinating on the flowering oleander bush by the side of the road.

57.

The Times, Revised

But enough of all these lies. *Let me tell it straight.* I hated the job. It was stressful. I dreaded people yelling at me on the phone. I dreaded the next tone of cheeriness I had to adopt. And in a matter of days, in some awful month I have almost banished from memory, my paranoia returned in one great thrashing starburst, the moments like a dot-to-dot that described a frantic scribble, a huge mistake, a great crash.

It seemed like it was always gray and dark. I hadn't slept in three days and I was becoming delusional. When you're in the swirl of it, when the thought processes become so wrong that it seems you'll never see clearly, every moment shakes with anxiety. You feel wrong in your very being. Your very skin, your face is not your own. You stand in a crowd of people and you feel alien. And you ride the subway and strange people offer to help you out. Because sweat is dripping off the tips of your fingers. Because your hands shake as you try to button the cuffs of your shirt.

Naima was warm and supportive as I complained about the stress of the job. I was having migraines and losing weight, and she stood by me. She had her own life to live, too. Taking French and calculus and physics and chemistry. Running fifty miles a week through the coyote streets at the west end of Holly-

wood Boulevard. She put up with my meltdown as best she could. I grant her all of that.

But I couldn't sleep. One or two hours a night was a good night for three weeks.

At one point, my computer sent me a message concerning the scissors: *Put down the scissors, we know who you are.* At another point, the managers passed out donuts and punch because they were keeping me under surveillance. Everyone, even those I considered trustworthy coworkers, wanted to hurt me in some way. I cringed when they asked how I was doing, believing even their words were dangerous.

I couldn't sleep and I couldn't stay awake, and it was all I could do not to collapse on my keyboard. I stayed at my desk, too scared to swivel in my chair.

I mustn't look anyone in the eye, I thought. *I must only rise to use the bathroom.*

I memorized the opening paragraphs of the *Dhammapada* on the subway, repeating them over and over as if they were a lozenge.

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What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.

If a man speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows him as the wheel of the cart follows the beast that draws the cart.

--- --- --- --- ---

One morning around four a.m., I sat on the sofa in our apartment. Now and again, a car full of partiers, just leaving the bars or the dance clubs that

flashed in the night among the dark blocks along Hollywood Boulevard, would fly by below the window, the sounds of laughter and music taking on the timbre of shattering glass.

Naima came out of the bedroom rubbing her eyes. "Can't sleep?" she asked.

"No."

"I just remembered something."

"What?"

"When I was a little kid, I shot someone."

"You did what?"

"We were playing around with a gun and I accidentally shot this little boy."

"Oh, my god. Did he die?

"Yeah."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"No."

"The police never came out?"

"No, somebody just took the body away."

"No one from the kid's family came?"

"No! I don't know! Man, I didn't grow up in the suburbs! You don't trust the police in the ghetto. My mom would whup me good if I *ever* talked to one of them."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Isaac, come to bed! You're driving me crazy. Come to bed."

I got in the bed and Naima lay against me, caressing my chest with her left hand.

"C'mon, Poppa. Go to sleep. Go to sleep."

She rubbed her hands in slow circles against my chest, the movement becoming a focus, my body rising and falling to the rhythm she traced, the images that shuttled through my mind following the systole and diastole of my respiration: Naima, hands, a smoking pistol in the gutter, a long thin parchment filled with maps of the city. Central, West, Southcentral Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley.

But I still couldn't sleep.

I called David and he told me to pray.

58.

I Couldn't Convert Anger To Joy

The next day, the office had been rearranged and I was moved into another, slightly smaller room. The gray cubicles were new. But I faced a wall, not the open spaced plan of my previous location. I felt like I was a mouse in a cardboard trap. Every move was a gamble. Every person who walked by, an agent of the *Times*. Sweat pooled in my armpits and my groin. And at the end of the day, I crawled into the Director's office and told him I needed help.

He sent me upstairs to one of the staff counselors. I found out that quite a few people at the newspaper had such needs. Paranoia wasn't so strange at the *Times*.

I sat in the office with a very old man, and he asked me, "What's bothering you, son?"

"I just have this feeling that everyone is watching me. I know this is going to sound crazy, but I feel like you knew about me already, too." I sat with my fingers tapping the gray ends of the cushioned sofa, and as I sat, sweat dripped off my forehead, pooled at my armpits, fell in slow drops from the tips of my fingers onto the leather triangles of my brown loafers.

He gave me a taxi card and walked me outside. By the time I had left the hospital, I had a doctor's appointment. Later, armed with sedatives, with anti-anxiety agents, with an extended vacation, I finally slept.

I went back to work after a few days off. But I was never the same at the *Times.* I couldn't convert anger to joy anymore; I guess I never could. I dreaded the phone calls. The only thing that made work bearable was an occasional strangeness rising out of the stack of frustrated Angeleno complaints.

Dear Paperboy,

The old owner was a subscriber, and I cannot read due to a brain injury from a near fatal auto accident in 1993. Please cease and desist your delivery. Yeah.

Yours truly,

Mr. E. Butts.

59.

Marching Creatives

Then, in the summer of 1999, I got a call from my old Oberlin buddy, Mullen. He was in Los Angeles, working for a dot-com consultancy, one of those crazy businesses that sprang up like toadstools in the hazy glow of the Internet dawn. It was called Marching Creatives, and he was designing web sites for Nike and ABC. They needed bodies with talent. They needed copywriters.

And as I sat in the subway train, the car rattling down the tracks, I felt on the verge of a great change.

That night I got up around three a.m. and I went out on our balcony. I could see the green neon sign of the Hollywood Roosevelt hotel blazing like a giant phosphorescent skeleton above the deserted street. They held the first Academy Awards there in 1929. Right then, I wanted so badly to believe the green neon was a positive sign.

When I woke in the morning, Naima was gone. Off running the Hollywood hills. Dashing along the slow inclines of Hollywood Boulevard, past the apartment buildings and bungalows that lay just west of the Walk of Fame's terminus. Sometimes, she left the house before sunrise, avoiding the other joggers, and the occasional pack of coyotes coming down off Nichols Canyon.

Her legs were thick with muscles.

60.

Cabala

On my last day at the *Times*, I was filing away the accumulated complaints in the event my replacement received an old complainant, when I got my last call.

A middle-aged woman, her voice a strident quaver, shouted, "Hello, Mr. Publisher." Before I could answer, she continued, saying, "Look, young man. I had an agreement with you. You know that I only pay on four calendar days of the year? They have to fit in with the holy days."

"No, ma'am. I wasn't aware of that."

"You know you're Jewish aren't you?"

"Why, yes," I said, a little confused.

"You should know these things. The Cabala. Only certain days, coinciding with certain numerical values, can be days when I pay my bill."

Crazy people are sometimes harder to talk to than angry ones. There's probably some higher math-- imaginary numbers?--that explains why some folks want to pay their bills by the Cabalistic calendar, but they didn't prepare even VIP's for that. It was either pay by the rules or go to the newspaper box on the corner. The *Times* Cabala payment plan was unavailable well into the 21st century.

So I used my best tactic. I agreed with her.

"Okay, Mr. Publisher, you with me? Let me get the calendar out."

"Okay, I'm with you."

"How about December 12th?"

I raised an eyebrow. This wouldn't be hard at all.

"No, that's all wrong," she cried. "You knew that was bad, didn't you, Fred. Fred, you should see my Rabbi. He makes house calls."

Gritting my teeth, I tried to clarify. "Okay. You say December 12th is no good?"

"No! It doesn't work! How about December 14th?"

"Oh, yeah. That works."

"Yes, it really does."

"Definitely."

"Good. And May 6th? And June 8th?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Then it's settled, Fred. Mazel tov!"

61.

Children?

That night when I got home, I announced to Naima, "It's official. I am a better communicator."

"Really?"

"Aren't I?"

"Like my mom always said, 'Closed mouth don't get fed.'"

I pondered that one for a moment, then said, "Very soon, I'm going to be a Marching Creative."

I put my hands around her and held her soft head. She put her hands on my back, her head against my chest.

She said, "Do you think about having children, Poppa?"

"A child?"

"Yeah, Mr. Man. Don't you think it's time?"

"Shouldn't we get married first?"

"Not necessarily," she said. "I mean, my parents weren't married and their relationship was horrible. Your parents were married and—."

"Their relationship was horrible."

"Yeah," she said.

And as we sat down to eat dinner, listening to the radio, the newscaster describing another brushfire that had burned up acres and acres of Southern California chaparral, I wondered if I was ready for a child, ready to be a parent.

"Well, I am going off my birth control, so that means in about three or four weeks I will be very, very fertile," she said, slipping her arm around my shoulder. She whispered in my ear, "That means you'll have to make love to me every night."

I leaned back and kissed her and anticipated the bright pleasure of being against her, of cradling her valentine body in a slow, rhythmic rocking. I leaned my head back and whispered into her ear, "Why don't we start right now?"

I kissed her eyes, her forehead, the soft tips of her ears.

I removed her blue overalls, her white brassiere, her red panties.

I kissed her cheek and the velvet pout of her lips.

I saw her close her eyes, and she pulled my face against her warm, cottony neck.

I tasted her skin and it was salt joy.

We ended up on the floor, the radio still buzzing about evacuation and smoke inhalation and houses burned by the dozens. We lay quietly after our lovemaking, content and tired, sweat dripping off my temples and mixing with the sweat of her belly, her velvet lips soft against my shoulder. Our skin—our body's largest organ—flushed with blood happiness.

I told her I loved her and she whispered in my ear the most beautiful word in the world, "Good."

62.

The Bottom

"Good," if I had done things right. But shortly after Naima suggested we try and have a child, I began to feel frustrated, again. Though some nights were torrid, most ended unsuccessfully. Though I tried to arouse her with sensuous back rubs, kisses behind the ear, and quiet nights in the park under the stars, I couldn't seem to arouse myself. Lovemaking became a chore. Perhaps I sensed the awesome prospect of parenting, and staring up from the bottom of what seemed like a passageway to a great flame, I wilted.

Naima was consoling, telling me it would pass. That maybe I should try to practice pleasing myself, first. But the code of behavior I had adopted through the self-help group required that I didn't masturbate.

One night, heading home from a meeting, I cut eastwards over toward Hoover, and cruised the hooker streets. My reformation from the height of shame, when I saw that painted woman and her canopied bed and her hand-cuffs, had proved a powerful behavioral antidote. Most of the time, I didn't even think about sex. Perhaps I just wanted to feel dangerous, to feel the blood rush to my groin and not worry about the implications of unprotected sex. I cruised up that dark hooker street and felt the mingled flame of fear and desire lick my spine.

I saw a woman on a corner. She wore a very short sequined turquoise skirt and a silk half-shirt. Her skin was luminescent, a shiny brown against the

glittering mica of the sidewalk. Her face was an oval drop, and her lips were like two bursting hearts.

I slowed the car down to gaze a little longer. Before I knew it, she was up against the window, opening the door, and bouncing into the passenger seat. I tried to protest, but she smoothed her hair, fluttered her eyelids, caked in black eyeliner and green eyeshadow, and said, "Hey, baby. You want a date?"

I didn't know what to say. I saw that her legs were firm and her belly was flat. But I was struck with an awful fear; I was on the cusp of a great fall, and I needed to move away from the edge.

Suddenly, she reached across the emergency brake, and put her hand on my crotch.

Her fingers were hard, clumsy. I pushed her hand away, and she scoffed and got out of the car, slamming the door without a word, another car behind me already offering her an open door.

She left the scent of fruity perfume and smoke. I felt the heavy impress of her hand against my genitals, and I felt the shame of arousal.

When I got home, the horror must have been written all over my face for the first thing Naima did when I opened the door was say, "What happened to you?"

I vacillated for a moment about whether or not to tell her, but in the spirit of honesty, I confessed.

"You did what!!"

My heart sank and I started to spin like never before. The lights in the room swirling around my head.

Naima snapped her fingers and said, "Oh, fuck that! You are not going to check out now! No! No! No!!"

"Naima, I'm sorry. Let me explain—"

"No! There is no explanation for what you've done! I can't believe you thought about putting your nasty dick on her! I can't believe you did this to me, Isaac!!"

She raged, and as she got in my face and shouted, spit sprayed from her mouth and coated my neck.

I turned and ran.

I ran out the door, and as I left, I saw Naima climbing over the balcony of our second floor apartment and trying to jump. I gunned the engine and shot the car out onto Hollywood Boulevard.

I called David and asked him if I could stay at his house.

"No," he said. "What about your pops?" I started to cry, and he said. "Well, why don't you come over and we'll talk."

When I got there, the lights were turned down, there was a candle burning in the window, and he ushered me in, stroking his white beard. I tried to hug him, but he kept his hands at his side. He looked at me and said, "How is your woman?"

"I dunno," I told him, my head hanging low. "When I left, she looked like

she was gonna jump off the balcony. But we only live on the second floor so—."

I shook my head in sadness, my throat caught with grief.

"Umm."

"I don't want to go to my father's house. He's so hard for me to deal with."

"Umm."

"I just wish things were easier."

David sat with his hands across his chest, his arms and his tattoos exposed. He said, "Do you think that Naima and you, that y'all can work things out?"

"I dunno."

"Umm."

"Well, look. Y'know, it doesn't matter to me either way. I love you, no matter what you do."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Let me show you something." He led me through the living room into his library. He pulled a book off the shelf. Inside, I could see a sheet of paper. On it, the lyrics of "Sexual Healing" were scribbled out in a rush of black handwriting, blue corrections changing a line in the verse from *Drowning in love/now rising* to *I'm capsizing.*

"You don't think my relationship is that unique?" I asked him.

"No," he replied. "Look. R-r-really, what do we all want? We want to get our dicks touched, r-right? But what do we r-r-really want?"

"Friendship?"

"Yeah. It's a cold ass, lonely world." He sat down in a wooden chair against a mullioned window. "Ruth's with her sister. I'm all alone here." He looked at me, and for the first time I saw how old and tired he was. His tattoos weren't visible in the dark. I dropped the paper to my side, and I leaned against the window pane. Then he reached for my hand. I let him hold it for a minute. When he began to stroke my finger, I tore my hand away and ran through the house, out the front door and to my car.

I drove out toward the west, finally hitting the ocean and turning north, stopping just past county line at a beach south of Point Mugu Naval Base. I walked the trail out to the point. There was an old crumbling parking lot built into the side of the coastal mountain. It had been worn away by the surf, and a block of concrete hung over the ocean forty feet below, rusty iron rods twisted out of the jagged end like a severed arm. A natural stairway descended to the edge of the shore, and I walked down to the bottom where a natural bridge connected to a very large slab of rock, a tiny island, no bigger than our apartment. I crossed over and sat on the weather-beaten rock, looking as far out toward the horizon as possible. The wind blew my hair back and whipped the collar of my shirt. The top of the rock looked like the crenellated wall of a feudal castle, and I sat in one of the squared out spaces and watched the surf roll in and out, in and out.

When I called home from a payphone a little later, no one answered.

I made my way back to Hollywood and crept up the stairs of our apartment building. When I entered, she was on the floor.

"Naima?"

She moaned, and when I reached her side I saw she had cut her wrists. Blood ran onto the carpet where it formed a small pool.

I ran to the phone and called 911.

When the paramedics arrived, they said, "How long has she been like this?"

"I don't know!" I cried. "I don't know."

"Got a pulse?" one of the medics asked his partner.

"Yeah, it's faint, but it's there."

They lifted her on a gurney and took her down the elevator. I jumped in the back of the ambulance and we sped through the crowded streets, finally reaching the emergency room. In ten minutes, we were sitting in triage, Naima hooked up to blinking, beeping machines, a doctor and two nurses swarming around her with needles and stethoscopes and retinal scanners.

I sat in a plastic chair at the foot of the bed, my head in my hands.

They kept her under observation for two days, and then I took her home. She seemed to retreat into some former self, sucking her thumb, and curling herself up in the bed. I gave her what comfort I could, bringing her hot tea and waffles; playing her favorite cds—Nirvana's In Utero, Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Ju-

liet; sitting next to her on the bed and smoothing her hair, running my fingers along the back of her neck, fitting the bed sheet around her body.

From time to time, she would look up at me, her thumb in her mouth, and stare.

On the morning of the third day, I woke up, and she was gone. All her clothes, her toiletries, her school books—every scrap, every thing of hers was gone. On the pillow where she slept, I saw a long curly strand of her hair. I picked it up and pressed it against my lips.

I looked frantically around for a note, some indication of where she had headed. Confused, I must have overlooked the letter that was taped to the television. When I found it, at last, I read: *Dear Isaac, I have always loved you, but it seems like you aren't capable of returning that love. Let's just end it before it gets any worse. Don't search for me. I am not at my mother's house. I don't hate you for what you did. But I can't let myself go any lower. You take me low, Isaac, and I need to rise up again.*

I sat on the floor, paralyzed. I looked around the room and focused on a picture on the wall, taken when I graduated from college: Naima and me, my brother and Naima's mother and my mother sitting together on a stone bench in the English Department courtyard, our arms around each other. She was wearing a beige shirt with a yellow flower and a warm smile. Something about the way she looked into the camera lens suddenly sent me into a panic. Frantic, I went into the kitchen. I pulled open the drawers and found the butcher's knife.

I pulled my pants down, grabbed a hold of my penis, stretching the limp tissue out, measuring the distance with slow, shaky strokes, to sever for all time what seemed the prime mover of all my troubles. I took several more practice swings, sucking all my breath in, my lips, my eyes taut with purpose, my chest rising and falling in great swells. It was time, and I pulled my arm as high as it could go, my jaw clenched, my eyes cut with blind hate, and brought the blade down, when--

The phone rang.

I froze, my hand and the knife caught in mid-swing, my mind racing. *Was it Naima calling?*

But when I picked up the phone it was only my father.

"Isaac, how are you?"

"Dad?" I put the blade on the counter and started to sob.

"Son, what is it? What's wrong?

"Oh, dad. Naima's left me."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," he said, tenderly.

"I don't know where she is," I told him, my voice cracking. "She just took her stuff and left. She's gone, she's gone, she's gone."

He let out a great sigh and said, "Well, if you want a faithful girlfriend, you have to be a faithful boyfriend."

"Sure," I whispered.

"Maybe she'll call later. These things blow over sometimes."

He talked for a while about fights between my mother and himself, about the time she threw a butter knife at him in an argument about a car payment, about the time she dumped a bottle of red wine on his baseball statistics.

"Is that why your marriage ended?"

"No. We just grew apart."

In the silence that followed, it was as if a thick rope rose up uniting us, and I felt closer to my father, linked, in a way that I hadn't been for a very long time. I sat down on the floor. "Dad," I said, "I love you."

"I love you too, Isaac."

"What should I do?"

"I don't know. You'll have to talk to Naima. Remember, more communication is better than less communication."

When the call ended, I went into the bedroom and lay down, putting a pillow between my legs and looking out towards the Hollywood Roosevelt. I could hear the crowds walking towards the Chinese Theater, the carloads of tourists racing down the street to find a parking place, music blasting out of their cars in a jangling frenzy.

Naima didn't call that day or the next one or the one after.

Work kept me preoccupied, though a steady fugue of grief rang in my ears, my gut roiling in a dark adagio. I was finally a full-time writer, getting paid a hefty salary to string together a sexy line of nouns and verbs. But it didn't mean a goddamn thing.

I stopped going to 12-step meetings, taking myself from my apartment in Hollywood to the Water Garden business park in Santa Monica listlessly, my eyes burning with tears, my mouth filled with dry ash. There was an artificial lake in the middle of the complex of low-rise office towers, and I sat on a bench next to the freakish blue water, numb with pain.

My business card read, "Isaac Abramowitz, Copywriter." It was what I had been dreaming of for years, what I had craved ever since I had felt the first sweet achievement of writing those lines for Stern's *Private Parts*. *I had arrived*, I thought, and all those times tying up fifty-pound bundles of newspapers in the lobby of the very building where Summer Selwyn created ads for Spielberg and Scorcese, every time I entered a video store and saw one of my taglines, every time I thought of the distance between the crazy Hollywood success stories I liked to believe my writing had bankrolled, and the petty, pathetic state of my own career—finally it all should have been worth it.

After a month, my boss assigned me to the creation of the official, online home of America's leading sex symbol: the creamiest dream television could offer; America's number one blonde haired, big-titted, golden white beauty: Pamela Anderson. I was to be her ghostwriter.

Though I would never actually meet her, never actually speak with her, merely following the creative direction of my superiors on various projects—the creation of a welcome letter, the production of zany little one liners to become part of an animated Pam figure who exclaimed "You bad boy!" and "Ooh! Watch wear you put that thing!" whenever a visitor dragged his cursor over the hot

spots on the animated cartoon, the planning and judging of a contest for registered members to write a thousand word piece imagining if one day they awoke to find they had been transformed into their favorite babe—so many of them began, "I was in the shower, you know, soaping up. And when I looked down, I suddenly realized I had these amazing breasts! So I just stayed there." Though I cannot judge this unknown person, this glow of a being, I like to imagine she was just as sweet and kind as she appeared in her audiovisual works.

But when I left work and went home, I lay in bed unable to sleep, tracing the spot where Naima ought to be.

63.

The Consolation of Baseball and Poetry

One Monday morning, I woke at six-thirty after a late night of writing bad poetry.

In a panic, I wondered where Naima was, feeling for her, touching the soft crush of the pillow for an echo of her sweet head. Then I realized my mistake. I could pull the covers back over my head. But my father had invited me out to lunch and a ballgame at Dodger Stadium.

The Dodgers were playing the Expos. My father and I sat in the loge level, above first base. We had been to Langer's Deli before the game, and afterwards sat in the long shadows cast down by the stadium level deck above us, talking in a desultory way. Talking while I seemed to liquefy inside.

"Gagne's 4-5 with a 4.57 era. I guess that's pretty average," I said, lamely.

"The word is disappointing."

His off-hand reply was irritating. Didn't he know that Gagne had potential?

... But we were connecting. I mentioned the monster of a player, Vlad "The Impaler" Guerrero, who upon delivering the decisive blow that day at the ballpark, a dead-on laser throw from deep right field over two hundred and twenty seven and six eighths squares of neatly mown grass, carefully combed infield dirt, a pitching mound as perfect and beautiful as a silky black cat named Duchess who slept on top of the fridge next door in apartment three-oh-three,

straight on through that Business Man's Special afternoon to land with a thud in the Montreal Expos' catcher's mitt for the tag 'out' at home plate. Yes, dad and I actually agreed. And again we agreed when as we were leaving the ballpark, trusty Ross Porter, long time Dodger announcer and trusted friend of Angelenos everywhere (almost as much as Vin Scully, who came over from Brooklyn in 1958) chimed in on FOX 1150AM that Vlad's throw in the seventh inning was the decisive blow against the Dodgers. And, did I mention, I felt like clacking the soles of my shoes and doing a jig because this was absolutely, without a doubt, the greatest day of my life ever!

But I shouldn't get ahead of the facts, the coincidences, the flood of meaningfulness obtained by these few agreements in the smoggy hills above downtown Los Angeles. It wasn't that my dad and I didn't relate well, that over the last decade we hadn't shared many instances of unanimity over various formal dinners and slow, stiff walks through leafy streets to the sandy beaches strewn with sunbathers.

(Not that I should bring it up again) but when that moment came in Dodgerland, and I was afraid it might happen, when something my father said really penetrated the thick skin of certainty I had formed in the previous three days regarding the "operative supremacy of the individual center of revelation" (thank you Alfred Kazin and your Inmost Leaf) and I was cast adrift once more--And I thought back to a moment when the four of us, dad, K., my brother, Naima and I sat at the rosewood table, and how I transported myself, body and soul, onto a raft with Naima, my legs hanging over the side, halfway in the wa-

ter, my bamboo fishing line cast and ready to yarn-suck, the Mississippi rolling past like a symphony of freedom. And he said, "the word is disappointing."

Maybe it all built up to that moment? Earlier that day I had rushed out of my apartment clad in buttoned-down conformity and a newly shod blackness on my feet, plodding down the Walk of Fame to the Red Line, and stumbled on the pink marble star of Buster Keaton. And later, on the subway speeding downtown, I opened my journal and wrote this, my "Make-up Poem for N.B.":

i.

This space
between us
a rejoinder

where we've always been
two container ships at sea,
full of compass, my useless

topsail, your deep keel
a passport for our travel
our unlikely heads paired

underwater, steaming
for home, anchors struck
on the post beyond the horizon

five fathoms down
I see change, the smoke
above our resting place

in the thick versions
of tomorrow's clouds
a mass of questions

roped to the wind. We
skim below the waters,
the course home

is below

in the hollow
of your neck, my nose
for this home
of warm candles
and twining, we touch

the crossing
where we--

the kite, the string,
the key, the electric

discovery, our difference
in the mirror a new ground--

yet so often my fragment mind
searched the furious blues for you

and found a concept
where a row of keys

sings through a lost chest
in the depths of a wreck,

as if each inflexion,
every time you sounded off,
"Good," you said,

a grace note
on a melody with
eighty-eight variations.

You who listened more
        who felt
        more, more

more that was good
        and enough
and fitting like

        you could reach inside
        this pale uniform
        and fix the grandfather
        clock ticking off-beat
        in the cabin

where the wolves fly down
and eat the little Jews
and suckle new pups
on the milk
of the new world;
inferiority is the soul
of false witness
when I die
bury me with the sparrows.

Outside, Hollywood,
skin of neon holy,
tourists and whores

of Babylon boogie
and busy snapshots of Mr.
Chaplin's impersonator

along the Walk
of Fame the Wax
Museum sells out first.

Hollywood, the axis
mundi of human culture,
making makes us we:

The oil-stained lips
of the Pakistani man
who owned the Arco

station at Sunset
and La Brea, and told you,
"Niggers are so stupid,"

when you asked about
putting air in the tires
of our Superbeetle;

The rouge-faced white
woman who hissed, "I am
so weary of black people,"

while you passed her
in the parking lot of Ross:
Dress for Less.

And I seem to have
played at Odysseus
to your Penelope

for so long
fighting a war
with myself

when the battle
waged in every breach
of custom, fear

you countered with the kiss
of forgiveness, or have I turned
your sword into the other cheek?

ii.

Enough is enough.

There is sweetness
at dinner, over plates
of eggplant and carrots.

Downtown Santa Monica
teems with liberals,
cameras around their necks

clicking photos of homeless
truth junkies
sipping Carlo Rossi, their hearts

bare in the shadow thrown
behind the moon on the old pier
the ferris wheel

rotates 'round a central
hub, the cars at the end
of each spoke in the wheel

swaying with couples
pressed against
each other in

the cool ocean
spirits drift us

together as we gaze

out into the black Pacific
a long room, the ceiling
dotted with pinholes

a green giant blowing a pinwheel
in the marmalade gold
of an applesauce morning

where we played marbles
in the sand, rolling my heart
into your brown eyes

the ocean slapping
against the rotting poles
below the organ grinder

there is a coiling
mess of motives
though to be true

I am none of these
and you are more
than any something;

love takes these rough
waters and goes home
before a fire

a loaf of sweetbread
browns above the coals
where the warmth

smelts the dough
blade of a long curve,
our kiln, a kindling

in this container
ship on the weave
of waters, we speak

into the joining
place where
we stay.

He said, "The word is disappointing."

I shifted uncomfortably in the yam orange seat. Out of nowhere, a young boy, perhaps six years old, ambled down the stairs and grazed my shoulder ever so softly with the long fingertip of one of those large blue styrofoam Dodger hands.

And, to fully cement this experience, to construct a meaningfulness, at least for sanity's sake -- when my dad mentioned seeing Vlad the Impaler hit one off the scoreboard (or nearly he thought); and I mentioned seeing Mike Piazza hit one onto the bleacher roof (even if it was during batting practice); and we both recalled the game we saw Dave Kingman hit three home runs to the blue section, all upperdeck shots, during the late 70's; and I even ventured asking what the crowd was like at Ebbets Field when he too was just a kid. And he said, "They were much, much more intelligent than the L.A. fans." And he continued, on and on, reminiscing about the first time he attended a game, about seeing Jackie and Roy hit home runs in '54.

Please.

And Captain Connectwise (now stitching up all the dots), I asked him about Jim Bouton's Ball Four. "How did Bouton write a story about the underside of baseball in 1970?" I asked. I was feeling it, and even felt a little full of myself, laughing, "Ha, ha. Dad, what were his methods? Were they sound? Did he write in the bullpen? Is that what they do out there? And why did he get blacklisted by the baseball establishment? And why did they call him a communist?

And why were they scared of him?" And all he did was point out that "professional baseball players are human, too."

Please please please please please please think bigger.

And when he unloosed himself as I hadn't seen in years, and jumped out of his seat in the fourth inning and said, "Go ahead Geoff (Blum), hit a home-run!!" (Mr. Blum being a key member of his fantasy baseball team), though my first reaction was to shush him, I suppressed the urge. And when he stood up again in the eighth inning and said, "Go ahead Geoff, knock one out of the park!!" And when Marquis Grissom hit a ball right down the third base line and it skirted along the fence until an overeager fan leaned over and grabbed the ball and my dad shouted with the rest of the frothy-throated hecklers, "Arrest the bum!!" And I said to him, "For what? I mean, geez, what would you say on a job application in the 'Have you ever been arrested before?' section: "Dear prospective employer, I was arrested for preventing the home team from taking third base?"

Please believe me.

And when Paul Lo Duca swung and missed at a pitch in the dirt and stumbled towards first—Lo Duca even, 2001's darling—career minor leaguer who had finally gotten his shot and was hitting well over .300 and made everyone nearly forget about Piazza; even sweet Paul Lo Duca swung and missed and stumbled down the first base line and the home plate umpire picked up his bat, smashed it into the dirt and, and--it just stood straight up, perfectly balanced on one end, a miracle, a defiance of gravity--and I said "Dad, do you see that?" But,

he wasn't listening. And on the very next pitch, I tell you in all honesty, Lo Duca creamed one all the way back back back back! Gone!! to dead center field just over the 395 marker and to the right of Jackie and Roy and all the Boys of Summer stamped into the padded blue outfield wall at Dodger Stadium, their images forever watching over the game.

It was all too much for one day, and I got back to Hollywood and my empty apartment, my body spent of energy, my mind febrile with the hot flickering of thought. I had connected with my father. He had been himself, full of verve, full of love for the game we had shared all our lives. But all my passion was for what wasn't, was for a broken thing, a vase shattered into a thousand pieces. How I wished I could turn back the hands of time! How I wished I had cut the damn thing off when I had the nerve.

I wandered out to the Chinese Theater and looked at all those old footprints in the cement. I was too sad even to put my feet in the tiny impress of those funny men who had lightened my spirits so many other nights: Chaplin, Eddie Murphy, all the comedians who trafficked in the currency of laughter. I was a stone and my feet slogged along the Walk of Fame. The gray gargoyles that ringed the roof of the Chinese Theater haunted the air. I saw her spirit look out at me and I felt her presence everywhere: in the faces of giggling teenagers, in the slow swagger of young couples, in the quiet closeness of elderly men and women who leaned into each other and gazed up at the green pagoda rooftop with wide-eyed wonder.

Later that night, I sat in my bedroom. I looked at the poem I had written, considering the feelings I was trying to express, pondering my day at the ball-park.

I imagined I could hear her sleeping, wherever she was, her breathing regular. I imagined what she would say to me, "Be my friend and be yourself. If you want me here too, then ask me questions. Quality time, baby. Silence ain't it. That ain't no connection, Mr. Man. Don't just sit there like a lump on a log."

I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror, and I spoke these words low and unsure, "What are you afraid of? Are you going to fall in? What would you hit?"

I called my mother and my grandmother picked up the phone.

"Hello," she said, her voice soft and fragile.

"Granma. It's Isaac."

"Who?"

"Isaac."

"Oh, hello. How are you?"

"Not so good."

"Oh, well. What do you have to complain about? You're young. Wait 'til you get old and tired. Then you can complain."

"Yeah. But Naima. She's left me."

"Oh."

There was a moment of silence where I thought sadness would well up, where I expected my grandmother to say something wise that would put everything in perspective, but like every other older adult in my family, she did something else. I should have been ready for disappointment by that time, perhaps. For she ended the momentary silence by saying, "Oh, I'm telling you, getting old is no fun. Sometimes I'm just so tired, I'm ready to go. Once you get to my age, sometimes you just don't want to be here."

64.

Reconciliation

Two days later, Naima walked through the front door, took a look around, and said, "You haven't done much cleaning."

I got off the couch and, head down, arms outstretched, rushed to her.

She pulled her head back, her expression a mixture of gentleness and derision.

She held a black duffel bag in one hand, and a brown grocery bag full of shoes in the other. She looked good, her face shining from within like it always had.

I must have stared at her for awhile, because she finally said, "What you lookin' at, man?"

"I'm so glad you're home," I whispered.

Her eyes darted softly from my eyes to my lips and back again.

"Isaac, I know I can get a little too emotional, perhaps a little too impulsive sometimes—"

"And aggressive."

"And aggressive," she agreed, nodding. "But you need to reconsider if you want this relationship. What you did doesn't speak well to that, don't you think?"

"You're right. I'm confused. I'm confused because my libido seems so unbalanced."

"Is it your sex drive or your self-confidence? Why do you think you can't stay hard?"

"Maybe, I am a little, a little impotent. Even after all this time, I really want to make love to you. But when it comes to, to the act, I, I falter. And I feel like you aren't interested either."

Naima leaned against the counter top. She pushed a dirty cup to one side. There was a plate of cold spaghetti. She looked at the food and gestured at the pasta. "It's like this: if you don't warm this up, it ain't gonna be any good."

I stood there, my mouth agape.

"I'm just saying, a woman needs foreplay. You're getting older. You're not a teenager anymore. Maybe you need foreplay, too. Don't spend so much time escaping into your books. Sit on the couch and talk to me, watch a movie with me, take me out to coffee like you used to."

I went up to her and she held her head back, at an angle, her lips pursed.

"Let me make it up to you," I said. "Okay?"

She brought her chin down, put her hand on my face, turning it to one side, then the other. She sighed and shrugged, and said, "I don't know. Maybe. I'm not sure this face is gonna make it, though. It needs some color. You look like a ghost."

I grimaced. And then I kissed her. I kissed her so softly. I kissed her lips like I had just been rescued from a long, hungry exile. I kissed her lips, then lingered against her forehead, kissing her with my eyelashes again and again and again as she giggled and squirmed and sighed and finally said, "Poppa! Stop."

We went into the bedroom and she lay down in the place that had been so empty. I lay next to her on my pillow and stroked her cheek with my finger.

iii.

The Answers. In. Heart.

Let's get it on.
--Marvin Gaye

Screentest #3:

The Heart of Sam's Ebony

A Flick of Surreal Details

FADE IN:

5. EXTERIOR--OCEAN VESSEL--DAY

Our camera follows SAM. He stands on the deck of a large iron ship as it moves through the open ocean at night. The salt wind whips his brown hair, and the light of a trick lantern throws a flickering glare on the torn swells that move under the vessel.

ORCHESTRA MUSIC rises, it is from the last movement of DEBUSSY'S *LA MER*. The piano's lilting melody seems to match the sway of trough and peak, and we see the ship toss in the rock of waters. We ZOOM down from the sky to just above SAM's head. He raises his arms and we see the ship through his vision.

EXTREME CLOSE UP: SAM'S eyes. They remind us of a playground marble, a greenie, shot through with gray fissures. We ZOOM into the eyes, a long drop, a wooden pail we lower with wonder.

CUT TO:

EBONY climbing up a long, brown ladder. She takes a seat at the side of SAM.

SAM holds out a sunflower, its pistils tipped in orange against the black of the stamens. EBONY pulls a blue passport from somewhere near her bosom.

EBONY

Is this your heart? This place? Is this it?

SAM

I will trade you one sunflower . . .

(hands her flower)

. . . for your passport.

EBONY

Fair enough, Uncle Sam. . . .

(takes flower, sniffs it,

is unimpressed, but hands

him passport, anyway)

. . . By the way, what will you do

with that thing?

(pointing at the passport)

SAM

Learn more about you.

EBONY

Really, now? Sam, are you ready
to pray yet? I know you've
been resisting. Do you hear
your Maker, Mr. Man?

SAM

No, not clearly. But in this salt wind,
I taste something like what those words might be.
And when I look into the mirror of the water,
I see your face. And when I dive in, I go down
where there is only magic.

EBONY

Shit. You too much. You
really like to hear yourself
talk, don't you? Are you saying
anything, Uncle Sam?

SAM holds her passport high above him.

CLOSE UP: PASSPORT

There is a symbol embossed on the cover, a lighthouse with a flashing light that now FANS across both of their faces. SAM reaches into his trousers and pulls out a feathery quill.

SAM

Others, see? This is my offering, my sermon for those uninitiated in the rituals of color. O! Ebony! May they see this as prayer, a matchflame on which to focus, the lingering flavor of blackberry jam from a childhood meal. I am a lucky man. Others are not as fortunate. If I am well, I will show how black and white is never as bright as red.

EBONY

Well, just be sure you do me right, man.
'Cause if you black on this ship,
you already know this shit by heart.

SAM hands EBONY the quill and kisses her just above the collar bone. Then he makes his way down the ladder into the darkness where the ship becomes a mystery.

6. EXT.--FIELD OF POPPIES--DAY

SAM stumbles out of a hole in the ground and falls head first into a field of golden poppies. CAMERA ZOOMS out and reveals THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF YOUNG MEN, all inching closer together. At the center, a GIANT is eating his way towards the perimeter where a PAPYRUS SCROLL is unrolled by a FIGURE shrouded in red silk.

CLOSE UP: SAM

SAM (singing softly)
Mine eyes have seen
the glory of the coming
of the cord, it is broken
on the banquet where we
feast along the shore, the surge
of stars has fallen
where it is meet they cross in more,
this beat is marching on.

SAM closes his eyes.

FADE TO BLACK.

7. INT.—SAM'S ROOM--COMPLETE DARKNESS

We hear someone cursing, hitting furniture, knocking metal cookware onto the ground in a stupendous clatter. Then silence. We hear a needle drop, scratch and pop on an old, vinyl record spinning on a graphite phonograph. Slowly, the strains of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" begins and grows as we dissolve in the solution of the familiar *Get up, get up, get up, get up. Let's make love tonight. Wake up, wake up, wake up, 'cause you do it* <u>right</u>*!*

66.

Cleaning House

MarchingCreatives went from a ten-thousand-man strong corporation formed from the merger of countless smaller entities, from a new lion worth hundreds of millions in paper dollars, from all sound and fury signifying a new age—to bankruptcy, to receivership, to nothing. And me and the other ten thousand and one Marching Creatives were laid off.

But it really didn't matter.

For the next six months Naima and I discovered each other again, as if we had sat down and begun a long, slow revelation that moved from casual observation to remembrance to an easy silence. I cooked Naima's favorite dishes--lemon madras and eggplant, buttermilk pancakes for dinner, tempura mushrooms. We spent long weekend mornings curled together in the cool cotton sheets while the sounds of Hollywood flowed through our window like a hot wake. We walked the dirt trails of Runyon Canyon until we reached Mulholland Drive, then turned and took in the whole sweep of the city all the way south, the cylindrical stacks, the flame and smoke of the Long Beach oil refinery at the limits of the angel horizon.

Naima went to school during the day and I cleaned—the dust on the phone, the grime underneath the toaster, the mildew in the bathroom. The house smelled like lemon and oranges all day long I rubbed the disinfectants into any surface I could reach.

Unemployment lasted longer and longer. Our finances dwindled until we were living on our credit cards, debts rising in direct proportion to the difference between my former salary and my government check. I needed work, and while the first signs of the economic whirlwind that would sweep through the American fall of 2001, the first avalanche of failing dot-coms slowing the job market to a slow trot, I began working on *this* document, drafting page after crooked page of insensate riffs on Egghead and Lester, on interracial relationships, on the strange confluence of copy writing and self-examination, of formula and artistry.

I would show Naima my writing, and she would say, "You need more emotions, Isaac. You call yourself a writer? You don't even know how people feel."

I would disagree, and our little apartment would explode for a few moments, Naima becoming hot, like always, clarifying the issues with bluntness.

"Isaac, what the fuck are you saying: that all black women are angry? That they shouldn't be angry for what they have to go through? That I can't express myself?"

"No, no—."

"That I should just roll over and agree with you, worship your feet—."

"No, no, let me explain—."

"I ain't no white bitch. I am a black woman. We don't sugarcoat shit. You better really think about who it is you're married to."

"Yes, I mean—."

"Isaac!"

"You're always cutting me off. I can't get a word in."

"Too bad. Maybe you should be listening rather than talking. And when you do talk, be assertive."

"But I can't when you're being aggressive."

"Well, maybe I'll back off a little if you show me you can speak up for yourself."

But once the disagreement was out of the way, we settled back into that long, slow unveiling.

"Do you think we started out at opposite poles?" I asked. "Me being the really passive one and you being the really aggressive one?"

"No. Those terms don't mean anything, all full of racial profiling. Of course black people will be called 'aggressive' so you can lock us up for being righteously pissed off, while you cower in the corner."

"I'm not afraid."

"Really?"

67.

The American

Finally, opportunity knocked. I readied myself for an interview.

"Are you dressed yet?" Naima stuck her head out of the kitchen and looked at me as I came out of the bedroom futzing with my tie.

The scent of grilled potatoes and garlic filled the small apartment off Hollywood Boulevard.

It was late Spring, 2001.

"Oui, oui, mademoiselle. Mon ami. Mon petite bonbon. Yo voy a la El Segundo in search of the filthy lucre so that you may fill this house with the fumes of fromage," I said, my arms waving high.

"Whatever, chicharrone. Just don't use that terrible Frenglish during the interview. You're a copywriter," she said, pushing me gently on the shoulder, "you're not a real writer or anything."

"Oh," I said, grasping my chest, stumbling backwards, "Oh, my heart."

"Anyway," she continued, "don't forget how much you hated the last copywriting job. It's just a job. I'll never forget how much of a Dork Dorkerson you are."

"That's Mr. Dorkerson to you, sweetheart."

"Ok, but don't let it go to your head, Dorky. Here's your breakfast," she said, putting the plate of grilled potatoes on the low counter of our living room

table, steam curving up from the peppered, browned cubes. "Now, hurry up and eat. I don't mind if you act like a pig this time."

My interview was at two p.m. But I was heading downtown first for a job fair, and ate quickly while Naima told me about the oddities of university scientists. "They just waltz into the lab after giving a lecture on the Human Genome project and they expect everyone to bow down and grovel at their stinking feet. Like they spawned creation. Like they—."

"Whoa! Slow down General Brown," I said. "You must be kidding?"

"Oh no. I'm not. That muthafucka—."

"Baby, baby," I pleaded. "Settle down, please."

She stared at me, indignant, her lips hanging open, her eyebrows raised.

"You're just so sexy when you get upset. And I--." I paused, loosening my collar. "Well, you know how that affects my concentration. This could be a big day for me. You know how long I've been gathering rosebuds."

She folded her arms across her chest and said, "Well, Mr. Rosebud. I guess I'll let you slide this one time. Looks like I gotta deal with Dr. Big Bang without your help."

"Poor thing," I said, scooping the last forkfuls of spuds into my mouth, grabbing the black leather portfolio, and heading out the door. At the threshold, I spun around and asked her, "How do I look?"

Naima turned her head to one side and scrutinized me. "Well," she said, straightening my topaz tie and brushing a bit of fuzz off the shoulder of my cor-

duroy sports coat, "you look okay, I guess. You want me to boost your ego, to lie to you?"

I nodded.

She rolled her eyes and said, "You look *good*," the final word a solid thump, her voice a drum that soothed my nerves and made me part of some grand mockery, the comedy of all aspiration. *Good.*

I gave her a quick kiss, and she pulled her face back, turned me around by the shoulders, and sent me off with a mock-heroic boot in the backside, crying out in a horrible Irish brogue, "Be off with you, ya' ruffian. And don't come back til' you've got a job."

As I headed down the hallway towards the garage, I cast a look behind me. Most days, I stood on the doorstep and waved to Naima as she left for school. Today, she waved at me. A pillar of beauty in the shape of who she was: herself. The last thing I saw before the elevator door closed was her hands on her overall hips, hollering something I couldn't quite make out.

Once in the car, I headed towards downtown Los Angeles on the Hollywood Freeway. The bumper-to-bumper crush of cars lay before me, a long rope of smoking metal, the smog obscuring the bottoms of the Bunker Hill skyscrapers, the glinting tops laminar and tall over the dun greenhouse below. *It figures*, I thought. *First interview in six months and the entire world is on the 101.* To the south, spring sunlight dusted the brick windows of the office buildings along Hollywood Boulevard filled with busy Scientologists. I inched by Vine. The white swirl of the Capitol Building rose up like one of Naima's computer-

generated molecular models. As usual, her observations were spot on. Copy-writing allowed me to do what I loved and be well paid for it. But it was a forced artistry, not especially suited to my improvisational spirit. Sometimes it felt like packing beef into a steel grater and grinding until something pink came out; the clichéd scratches of black ink like spoiled meat, stinking up the page. All those moments when I found myself staring into the dumb mouth of my word processor, searching Roget's for synonyms to 'free' and 'good' and 'you.' Well, those moments would not be missed. In addition to my interview, I had another job from Summer Selwyn, writing taglines for the can't-miss summer block-buster, *Blowing up Los Angeles,* and I would have fun condensing a 120-page script into a ten-word punchline. I had scribbled a line down on my pad that morning: *In a city of fallen angels sometimes a hero is someone who can light a match.*

The traffic still an inert mass of heavy metals, I closed my eyes and imagined Ben Kingsley, voice of Spielberg's Artificial Intelligence, intoning the recent divide between what was my work and what was my lifework.

VOICE OVER

Behold! No longer need Isaac Abramowitz send "my deepest apologies on behalf of Wilkie Willes III, Publisher, Los Angeles Times," for whom, as VIP Customer Ambassador, he replied to long-winded missives from frustrated

Angeleno home delivery subscribers whose certified, return receipt requested communiqués represented the last attempt at a pre-litigation solution, e.g.,

V.O. (Cranky octogenarian. Phyllis Diller?)

You can guess my frustration with the Times. No matter how much I complain, things just don't get fixed. So I [sic] telling you Mr. Willes or Witless or whatever your name is, I'm sick of it! Sick to death! Thirty-three consecutive days your paper landed on top of my award-winning, red geraniums. Just look at the enclosed photographs! They aren't award winning anymore. You've smashed them into little bits. Did you know that the Sunday last weekend weighed over nine pounds? Why can't your delivery driver just put the paper on the side of the road like everybody else? Please do something. You should know that my attorney informs me that this matter is actionable.

Very sincerely,

V.O. (CONT'D)

Observe! No longer will he be haunted with the tart feminine sass of Pamela "Poppycock" Anderson for whom he ghostwrote the sexy prose of internationally disseminated biweekly diary entries, including those beastly iterations:

V.O. (My Aunt Dotty
as Pamela Anderson)

August 31, 2000

Dear Diary:

Only you know how relieved I am! Remember that stalker guy from India or Africa? … Wherever. Well, he's being deported back to France. You know, what he did was <u>not</u> <u>cool</u>. You do not ask

someone if they can feed your kitty. Actually, I feel sorry for him. But … you know. Mr. Mumbles only eats when I give him his tofu treats. He doesn't eat soy from just anyone.

Anyway … Dilly and I watched Roots yesterday. So educational!

September 9, 2000

Dear Diary:

Like what-*ever*. All those ugly rumors in the tabloids about my fake id or what-ever. The media is like so blowing this out of proportion. I mean, I never had to impersonate anyone, male or female. *Gawd!* You know … I shouldn't have to … like … prove who I am. Celebrities are celebri-ties because the cream rises to the top of the latte. Do you like that saying? I overheard it at Starfuckers this morning. Ooops! I just giggled too hard and spilled something on you, diary. I'm sorry. Oh,

you're drowning in Evian. Here … let me give you mouth-to-mouth … Mmmm. Diary, you're my only hope.

Anyway … I'm just going to try to put it all behind me and get my life back to … like … normal. I haven't been sleeping well lately. Things have been crazy. I wonder if I need to get laid. Tee-hee. Well, ba-bye diary. You're the only one that really knows what stuff is like ... like for me.

Luv ya!

P.

V.O. (CONT'D)

By Jove! No longer might he be but the wandering, exogamous man. Let him know his innermost self without (but accompanying shooting visions of satori) the crystalline homilies written in support of one Howard A. "Bada-Booie" Stern, a.k.a. Butt Man,

for whom he had created the Oscar-winning tagline — *Never before has a man done so much with so little* - that had catapulted Bada-Booie's Private Parts and its variegated outpourings - including the videocassette, the soundtrack, the HBO special: Behind the Making of "Bada-Booie's" Private Parts and the unforgettable Private Parts edible underwear - into clearly meritorious eleven-figure quid pro quo of the American variety.

We hear the funky swing of the WYNTON MARSALIS SEPTET slowly rising, the horn section a warm river of postbop rhythmics.

V.O. (CONT'D)

Finally, finally! might our hero re-capture some artistic integrity, some distance from his immersion in the laws of Aristotelian Spam Creation, videlicet, Law XXIII from De

Spamacaiae: "That spam which is good spam must be headlined with a 'YOU' of distinction. Every great spam begins with "you."

We hear the TRUMPET ascend to a note of bright high brilliance, a cascade of counterpoint coming from the reedy SAXOPHONES.

V.O. (CONT'D)

Hence, the strange fructification of philosophy and copywriting in the million-dollar campaigns: YOU CAN BE FREE AND CLEAR NOW! HURRY! ONLY $9.99!! and OH BOY, DO WE HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU!! and HEY YOU! [your name], YOUR HEAD CAN BE BIGGER!!!

The band finishes playing and we hear MR. MARSALIS' voice come in above the applause.

MR. MARSALIS

Thank you very much, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for coming out tonight. Remember the music.

V.O. (CONT'D)

So be it. The horror had passed. He was done with all that and all of the other commercial incarnations his writing had creatively bankrolled. He was writing something that really mattered. It was a script – an experimental novel maybe, one can never be sure -- about a wandering man, orphaned, outcast, adrift in a dark world where ancient mysticism, miscegenation and a bebop weave of smoky baize candles glows above an ancient river – and it was so *real*.

My reverie ended and the traffic began to creep forward.

Maybe it was the late afternoon Los Angeles haze. Maybe it was a whisper in the fraught wind. For whatever reason, the job interview felt a little like a cosmic joke. Really, what would it matter in the end?

78.

The Motherlode

I pulled into their parking lot. After a short wait in the small beige lobby, the secretary escorted me into a chilly conference room where I found a seat at the round hardwood table. A huge air-conditioning vent blew a cold stream of frigid air on top of my head, and I hugged my chest to keep warm.

A frizzy-haired woman in a mottled eggshell pantsuit entered carrying a legal pad and a manila folder. She walked up to me, stuck out her hand, and introduced herself.

"Hi. I'm Barb. Short for Barbara," she said, her cold, crisp British syllabication sending out small trails of frost that hovered between us. She opened the manila folder, pulled out a clutch of brochures and said, "Isaac, let me tell you what we're looking for," extracting one of the glossy booklets and handing it to me.

"This is our baby," she said. The covers announced in bold black letters, *SwellClub!*

"Very interesting," I said, thinking, *What a load of crap.*

Barb's eyes brightened and she leaned forward. "Isaac, you know that in direct we only have two-and-a-half seconds to get someone's attention. And you know what happens if we don't." She paused, waiting for my reply.

"It's right in the crapper – I mean, in the trash can."

"Right-o," she said, nodding.

To hell with my ridiculous snobbery. Before Barb could continue, I seized the opportunity and made my pitch, "Barb, I've a good idea what the American is trying to do, and I am totally confident I'm the man for the job. I've just finished writing for Toyota, Pamela Anderson--."

"Oh, how I love Ms. Anderson!"

"She is terrific! ... I mean, I was a ghost .... I never actually met ... I ... " My hands moved in strange gesticulations as I tried to convey some outline of the effect such an assignment had had on my life.

"Quite amazing," she said, batting her eyelashes.

I composed myself and nodded with confidence, adding as I locked eyes with her, "Barb, I love being a copywriter. I am sure I can help the American."

"Yes," she said, her cheeks reddening despite the cold.

"As I see it, the American has something everyone in this country needs. You need a writer who can--metaphorically speaking--smack your audience in the head and let them know you're out there."

"Yes, yes. It is hard to reach people."

So I reached across and put my hand on her wrist, "You know, Barb. My personal mission statement is 'The mission is you.'"

Barb raised her eyebrows.

My personal tagline was a reworking of the tagline I had created for *Saving Private Ryan* and it was now coming in handy. "And what that means to me is the most important thing I can do as a copywriter is make "you"--and that

means anyone other than me--feel special." I squeezed her arm and released it, smiling.

"Well, this is very impressive," she said. She sat back in her chair and tapped her chin with her ring finger, aiming her reply at some mark above my head, high on the wall. "Yes, yes," she said. "I must bring the bosses in on this one. You sit tight. I will be right back."

She left, closing the door behind her, and I punched the air with my fist. I sat back in the black chair and noticed for the first time the surreal oil painting, Mrs. Dilfer's *Love*. It was a large picture, framed in gilt. And it depicted several figures in black suits. They had no heads. And in the area where their heads should have been, the artist had placed big, black dollar signs.

The door opened and two slim men wearing slacks and ties entered the room, Barb in tow behind them.

The younger man strode up to me, stuck out his cuffed hand, and gave me a powerful shake, saying, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Abramowitz. I'm Robin Dilfer, Jr."

"And I'm Brint Naturally," the other man said.

"We are delighted to meet you," they said in unison, their voices a harmony of backslapping and bullshit.

Naturally joined the handshake between myself and Dilfer with two hands, and we shook collectively for what seemed like forever, my frost bitten fingers clinking against theirs like china at a Tokyo tea ceremony.

I had hit the motherlode.

They sat down at the table, and after a few cursory questions, Dilfer clapped his hands together and said, "This is terrific. When can you start?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Wonderful. Terrific. There is so much to do. This is a real opportunity. We're young and we're bucking the industry. We have so many more *Swell-Clubs!* to create. I really want to rally on this."

When I got home, I opened the front door and danced into the room, lifting Naima by the hand from the couch, and swinging my body from side to side. Firing up our computer, selecting a stream of music from the mp3 player, and trippin' across the room, singin' with Dizzy:

Grabbin' up your hats, coats, boots and everything

Leave your worries on the doorstep

Cause we're going by and by

Just direct your feet

You look neat

Naima pushed me playfully and teased, "Oh, Poppa! You might want to keep your day job."

But I just smiled wide and free, and sang even louder.

If I never had one cent, I'd be rich as Rockefeller!

Gold dust at my feet!

On the sunny!

On the shady!!

On the sunny!

Side!

Of the street!

I lifted Naima off her feet and swung her 'round and 'round the room. She giggled and laughed and screeched, and we whooped it up until the neighbors above started banging on the ceiling with their broomsticks.

Then we stumbled into the dark bedroom. We lay pressed against each other, our bodies a taut drum on top of the sheets; our mouths, our tongues, both dancer and dance. The lines from the D.H. Lawrence novel I had been reading echoing in my mind, now a farce, a cruel stupidity that couldn't be written off with the notion that he "was a man of his times," as my UCLA professors would claim. Lawrence, who sought out the truth of relationships like it was redemption--How could he write? *We fall from the connection with life and hope, we lapse from pure integral being, from creation and liberty, and fall into the long, long African process of purely sensual understanding, knowledge in the mystery of dissolution.* No, I say, Lawrence had it all wrong. We fall. But there is no such African process, no such belief system, and Lawrence's misinformed lumping of all things *sensual* into the cultural heap of the *African* made Naima's presence even more intelligent, more astounding, more a *resurrection of the ordinary*.

"Isaac."

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm fat?"

"Please. You are just right. You *are* beautiful."

"I wish I was smaller. All those white women, all these L.A. women with personal trainers and nutritionists and ludda ludda lud."

"The correct expression is yadda-yadda."

"Whatever. Ludda-ludda-lud."

"You are not being very kosher."

"Come over, here. I can go a second time."

"Are you sure you can handle this?"

I couldn't. The second session was a clumsy affair and ended.

So we lay in the dark, holding hands.

"What if I'm pregnant?"

"That would be great, great news."

"We've been trying for a while."

"I know. I feel like something's wrong with me."

"Well, it could be me too. It does take a while for the birth control to fully wear off, so I hear. It's only been a few months."

Talk shifted to silence, returning to talk again.

"Poppa, do you ever think about other women?"

"No," I lied. "Except when I'm watching *Baywatch* or *V.I.P.* or *Stripperella*. You know I have only one true Muse."

She looked at me in sweet disbelief, her eyes narrowed in false suspicion, her lips twisted in an attitude of sly consideration.

"Plus, someday we might get married and have a baby boy."

"Really? I don't know if I can marry you. And what if he's a she?"

I shrugged and pushed her back, pinning her to the bed, tickling her ribs while she writhed beneath me.

"Stop!!" she wailed.

I tickled her a little longer, her shrieks filling the air with punctuated joy, her mouth and eyes alive with pleasure. Finally, I let her go. We were both out of breath, and we cuddled against each other until sleep swept over us in a great cooling wave.

The next morning, I was punctual in polished Salvatore Ferragamo shoes, Hart Schaffner & Marx slacks, a starched white shirt, and green-chili-pepper print, red boxer shorts Naima had purchased in a fit of glee.

The first few weeks were like a honeymoon as the writing assignments poured onto my desk. I wrote an infomercial. Then a customer service letter. Then an email campaign. For a copywriter, the American offered everything one could wish for: urgency, variety, and the thrill of being part of a ferocious young corporate lion.

But the honeymoon ended and it became obvious the marriage had problems.

I sat with the Creative Team in a converted warehouse area behind the main building housing Dill's and Naturally's executive offices. It was dark and drafty. *SwellClub!* brochures littered the cement floor. Rows of towering metal shelving stretched off into the rat-infested distance. Despite the appearance of professionalism--the discarded dot-com desks moored on islands of industrial

gray carpet, backed against a phalanx of gray wall modules—the overriding aura was of a gloomy, gray sweatshop. In the middle of the Creatives' enclosure, a solitary green plant wilted from lack of sunlight. High above, cut into the corrugated steel roof, a lone plexiglass skywindow let in a meager, dim square of light. The warm Southern California sun heated the metal until the temperatures inside made us sweat. Everyone called it the *Cage*.

I began having trouble with Dill, with capturing his singular voice, with copying his vision onto the slick brochures and sales letters and junk mail that was the American's prime source of revenue production. Certainly, he was a smart and well-educated man, but at the core of his being he was an attorney. For Dill, it seemed society was an unwilling agreement to row the boat in one direction. Laws attempted to control people from going the other way. But god-fearing entrepreneurs like Dill knew that laws also slowed down the marketplace. As he would repeat to me in late night creative sessions, "Isaac, history moves toward the ever greater importance of those who have. This great country of ours is based on the purest idea there is—the individual--and the American is its realization." It was clear, therefore, that the American's very survival in the rapids of late 20th-century capitalism, where slamming millions created so much exposure, rested on Dill's navigation of the river of liability. My copy was quickly becoming dangerous.

To be sure, there is a difference, in the highly stylized world of direct marketing, between 'Wait, there's more!' and 'Wait, there could be more!' And I was all too willing to agree with Dill when he suggested changes to the copy. He

had that vision "thing," to borrow a term from the articulate President Bush. The industry was growing. There were millions of untapped markets. The industry was pulling a measly four billion dollars per annum and the giants, like General Motors, were turning out material a sixth-grader could speedread. An awkward subordinate clause, a misplaced modifier, even an illegitimate exclamation point [!] -- the undisputed, *ne plus ultra* of direct mail copy -- could prove fatal. On one occasion, Dill chided me for my "obviously lazy" imperative, revising 'Call Now!' to 'Call Now!!' Another time, he rushed into the Cage to scold me for my "trite closing statement, 'Thank you!!'" when I "might have written: 'Thank You! Thank You Very Much!!!'" and the "numerical extravagance, the sheer cash guzzler of '1 (888) 555-1212' when you might have merely used '(888) 555-1212!'" Churning out copy was tough enough without having someone micromanage your punctuation. I felt the writing process become a burden, my head thick with clichés, my drafts full of sure-fire bullet-pointed, benefit-oriented copy certain to suffer from Dill's neurotic modifications. It didn't really matter what I wrote, Dill couldn't resist tinkering. A redundant appositive here. A smoother ambiguity there. Each new revision saved to my hard drive by increasing the version number by one, the final numeral stretching into the hundreds.

I was always annoyed when I came home, and I complained to Naima night after night of how I hated the American. She listened, she told me to quit, she told me to follow my intuitions, she told me, again, to grow up and be a man. "Poppa," she said, "you don't know how easy you have it."

Then one day in late April, I walked through the door of our apartment and Naima said, "I'm pregnant."

I grabbed her in my arms and held her, rocking from side to side, caressing the smooth spot on her neck below her braids.

"The doctor says I must have been pregnant since November. I just didn't notice."

We pulled out the calendar and figured the due date would be in August. A Leo. A fresh new lion, a blended swirl of genes, a new wine in an old jug.

I was overjoyed, saying, "We are going to be parents! Parents!"

"Poppa," she cooed, resting her head on my shoulder, "my stomach hurts."

I was on the job, I was ready like Freddie, I was action Jackson, I was on the spot like Scott, springing into the kitchen, pouring her a glass of carbonated water.

She sat on the couch and sipped, rubbing her stomach.

The following week, we met with her doctor.

He examined her. Everything was okay, and afterwards he turned to me and said, "Make sure she drinks plenty of water, and, in a few months, when she gets more uncomfortable, be sure and carry things for her, help her up the stairs if she'll let you." He shook Naima's hand, and said, "I can tell you're a proud woman, and you should be, but let your boyfriend carry all the bags for awhile."

69.

The Inimitable Emoticon Valediction

:-]

The job at the American descended like a nightmare through the daylight hours, and I slumped in my desk in the Cage, sending Naima instant messages when possible, dreading each new project.

But I was soon to be a father, and one day, thinking responsibly, hoping to head off another layoff, I knocked on the half-open door of Dill's office.

"Enter," he said, not looking up from his desk.

I walked in and waited for Dill to offer me a seat. He didn't. Instead, throwing his elbows on the desk, he barked, "What is it, Isaac? I'm extremely busy. The Dark Croix representatives will be here any moment."

I shifted my feet, and forced myself to speak. "Sir, I've been thinking about our Creative Process here. I feel like I don't always know what you want. When I give you something to review, it always comes back entirely rewritten. I want to make sure we are on the same page, but I think we need someone who could, sort of direct --"

"Just say it, Isaac, for god's sake!" Dill dropped his hands on the desk, peered over his shoulder at the stock ticker running along the bottom of the television screen, and exclaimed, "Damn! Wall-mart is down a point!" He swiveled his chair around to his computer, and started pounding on the keyboard, before remembering that I was there and shouting, "Isaac, come on! What is it?"

"Well, sir." I stammered, I couldn't speak clearly. Finally I said, "I think we could use someone, a Creative Director say, to direct us. The Creatives, that is. I know you don't want to be revising everything I do. You have more important things to attend to, um, Dark Croix and all the rest. I really -- "

Dill, perhaps exhausted from re-reading the fourth-quarter S.E.C. filing of his beloved CostCo, looked up from his desk, and said, "Isaac. Let's cut to the chase. Yes, things could be smoother. If you have someone in mind, just make it happen." He finished and turned back to the screen.

"Oh, hell ye – I mean, thank you, sir. I have just the person," I said, clasping my hands and bouncing on my heels.

Dill scowled at the display of joy, and said, "Get out of my office."

And that was how Jehora Burple reentered my life.

We had worked together at Marching Creatives, creating websites and marketing strategies for the world's largest corporations. At its height in early 2000, Marching Creatives had 11,421 employees and a stock price of $278.66. As part of the Creative Team, we conceived, built, wrote and launched those famous Hindenburgs--Etoys, Excite and the tragic customcobbler.com, a one-time Microsoft subsidiary—all the burning wrecks of the boom. While the going was good, the perks flowed through the cubicled aisles like a chocolate river: free cappuccino, catered lunches from ChezBlanc, three in-house masseuses, fully-paid 'training' in Zen storytelling – it was good to be a Marching Creative in 1999. But, the boom went bust. The Custom Cobbler went bankrupt. No one wanted

to size shoes by sticking their feet up against the monitor of their personal computers. By Halloween 2000, Marching Creatives stock was worth less than a Sacagawea and the layoffs were in high gear.

But of the eight writers, twelve designers, six art directors, three editors, two proofreaders, and one assistant who slumped forward in the Dockweiler Beach Conference Room while fawning Human Resource personnel, in muted pastel skirt-suits, broke the news that everyone expected anyway, Burple was inconsolable. And despite warm support, she sobbed uncontrollably into the spidery fine print of her Severance Papers.

I always admired her. She had been my boss during the Custom Cobbler engagement. Following a hastily convened interview, she was brought on board the American just as the entire political entourage of Dark Croix, including President Milosevic himself, paid a personal visit as a demonstration of their appreciation for the success of *CreditWhoa!*

Milosevic's visit was the feather in the cap for Dilfer, and, in a wild moment of abandon, he sent the senior staff an email containing the all-uppercase subject line exclamatory -- RE: SYNERGY! -- an embedded hyperlink to Fortune's online listing of the world's one hundred wealthiest people, and the inimitable emoticon valediction: :-]

One day in June, Dill called the whole Creative Team into his tight office to discuss the creation of a brand new club. *SwellClub!* was great, but it was a generalist's response to an increasingly balkanized market. *CreditWhoa!* was a

step in the right direction. But there were a lot more clubs which he could affix the suffix "Whoa!" or some such pleasing declarative like "Solid!" They would have to rush creation. The banks were giving solid financial support, but they wanted profits by the fall quarter. He explained the sales side to Breakneck. He explained the product development side to Barb. Then, he turned to me and said, "This should be easy, Freeman. Think AMEX and Denny's. We need a really powerful name, something to build a great brand on." He turned back to the group, and said, "Everybody go back to the Cage and brainstorm this one, I have a conference call with Dark Croix." As we headed out, Dill picked up his remote control and yelled, "Hey, I really want to rally on this!"

A week later, with the name picked and the travel agency contract finalized, I began crafting the copy for a brochure. My tone would be lush, irresistible. It would evoke all the beauty and allure of the perfect getaway. Luxurious cruises in the South Pacific. Indulgent resorts on the white-sand beaches of St. Remy. Jovial walking tours along the French Riviera. My copy sizzled with images of unforgettable, overwhelming freedom. But as I researched these earthly paradises, I felt a mounting urge to escape a world that seemed, once again, stacked against me.

A few days later, shortly after I had submitted a rough draft of the *TravelWhoa!* brochure, I got a message to appear in Naturally's office.

Naturally was out of town. When I walked through the door, Breakneck sat in Naturally's well-oiled leather chair and Burple sat to his right. I later learned from another coworker that these two had grown closer over the pre-

ceding months. Although Breakneck was a full twenty years younger, they shared a bitterness towards life that made them fast friends. They often swapped revenge fantasies over lunch. Breakneck rushing into his father's office while Breakneck, Sr., administered the vows to another dot-matrix printed list of 10,000 paid members of the Universal Life Church, and Jr. delivering a crushing blow with his boot to the back of his father's neck. Burple gathering up her collection of plastic Barbies, rushing over and up to the roof of her parents' blazing-hot Indian Wells house, and setting fire, one by one, to every last blonde-haired bitch, tossing the dolls down the red-brick chimney, before striding across the street, perching herself in the neighbor's walnut tree and savoring thirteen very crisp celery sticks as the flames rose into the smoggy sky.

"We called you in here today because we're noticing a pattern in your work," Burple said, her tone full of diplomatic urgency.

"R-really?" I stammered.

Burple lowered her gaze and said, "I, I know you're doing your best, but you need to do better. Your work--. Well, it's sloppy. You know how crazy it is around here and I just don't have time to comb through every last word of your copy. When you gave me *TravelWhoa!* the other day, you had a typo."

I was nonplussed. "Geez. I'm sorry. What was it?"

Burple twisted her mouth and said, "Well. It was Kauai. You misspelled Kauai."

Breakneck grunted.

"But it was just a first draft. I haven't even started revising," I said.

Burple waved her hand, "That's just not acceptable, Isaac. You're a professional, aren't you? Don't you know how to spell Kauai? I mean it's a state for Pete's sake."

Breakneck, watching this exchange with reptilian patience, interjected, "What we're trying to say, Isaac, is that we want you to grow here, to take more initiative, to be a VP one day like me! Don't you want that?"

"Yeah. Who wouldn't?"

"We understand each other then?"

I looked over Breakneck's head at Naturally's framed MBA diploma from the Harvard Business School, and droned, "Of course. My mission is you."

And I did indeed try harder. I scrutinized the uniform capitalization of "Thank You!" in the *CreditWhoa!* newsletter. I double-checked Burple's sclerotic, late night edits of the new *VegasWhoa!* brochure including her problematic use of the past participle 'drunk' in "After you've saddled up to the smorgasbord, drunk another glass of Red Bull and rum, and recharged your slot arm . . ." and her strangely evocative phrasing, "Imagine. You've just finished off a plate of Bally's deep-fried egg-salad bean dip. What could be better than hitting the crap tables? You never really know when Lady Luck is going to appear!"

But luck wasn't in the cards.

It seemed that Breakneck and Burple often found themselves in the Cage after eight p.m. when the rest of the Creatives were long gone. During one weekend stretch, it was rumored that Breakneck didn't leave the building. He slept in his chair. He ate from the snack machine. And he worked. There were

new deals to make. Reports to devise. Assholes to yell at. I tried to empathize. Perhaps he thought to himself: Why should I be the only one killing myself? 36 hours straight. No breaks? Who else was going to step up and make a commitment?

So he called a staff meeting.

The Creatives met in the conference room at 9:14 a.m., Monday morning. No coffee. No doughnuts. Mrs. Dillbuckle's dada vision of *Love* hovering over me like a domesticated buzzard. Breakneck and Burple sat at the end of the conference table, grim and sleep deprived, looking over me and the rest, as we fidgeted in our seats.

"People," said Breakneck, a little wired from the quintuple espresso steaming on the table in front of him, "Let me be blunt: we need more from you!" He slammed the table with his fist, spilling the coffee. "Jehora and I are working twelve to fifteen hours a day. And we need you to make the same commitment."

The room was silent except for the rattle of the air conditioner. Clouds of frost poured out of our mouths, but no one said a word.

Finally, I blurted out, "Fifteen hours?"

Burple glared at me, saying, "Yes! There are great things afoot. But we all need to work that much harder. Try to get things done faster, more efficiently. We should be able to write, come up with graphics, and print a new club in two weeks. This isn't *Costco."*

"Look," said Breakneck, sighing, "There really are big things in the works for us. New deals, new opportunities. We need everyone on board 147 percent!"

He slammed the table again with his fist and, in a spasm of passion, rose to his feet and said, "Look, you know I love you frickin' artists, but let me explain a few business fundamentals. The American operates with very small margins. We have huge labor costs, printing costs, mailing costs, bank fees. And we're a young company, so we have to knock our competition on their ass a little, if you know what I mean. For example, if it was up to me, I'd move our entire Customer Service Department to Simi Valley. It would cost less, and, let's face it, the people are just plain smarter than the folks we have here from the city."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

But Breakneck ignored me and continued. "My point is this: the six of us have the power to make or break this thing. Everything has to be perfect. From the program name – by the way Jehora, *TravelWhoa!* is brilliant – to the brochure design, to the font size, to the color of the disclaimers. Perfect. Got it?"

No one said a word. The air conditioning vent thrummed above our heads like the climax of Shostakovich's *St. Petersburg* symphony. Breakneck dismissed us, and I dragged myself back with the others inside the Cage.

As the day wore on, I became increasingly worried about my job security. All afternoon Breakneck made crude puns about "Hawaiian Islands" and muttered "Frickin' artists" while he scowled and spit into the wastebasket.

Was it worth it? Was this how I wanted to spend seventy-seven percent of my waking hours? I imagined a raucous old Jewish couple doing a shtick, Waiting for Godot's Junkmail.

Old Woman: Is it here yet?

Old Man: What?

Old Woman: The mail!

Old Man: You mean that stuff from the American?

Old Woman: You mean from Isaac, right? He's the one writing it.

Old Man: Is that Isaac a blockhead?

Old Man: What did I say?

Old Woman: Is that Isaac a blockhead?!

Old Man: He is a buffoon.

Old Woman: A moron. What's he want to do, be a best-selling junkmail author?

Old Man: Yeah. I mean, junk is junk. Who wants junk?

Old Woman: Junk is trash. That's why they call it junk. They might call it trashmail. Or crapmail. What about junkcrap?

Old Man: Or craptrash?

Old Woman: Anyway, he should thank his lucky stars for misspelling that little island. The island doesn't care.

Old Man: Feh! Who cares about an island?

70.

Doll Parts

Later that night, sitting in the living room, listening to an old Hole recording while Naima chatted about fibonacci sequences in *H. pylori* carbon bonding, I studied the want ads. The computer screen irradiated my face with an electronic lacquer.

I told her about Breakneck's comment.

"Y'all are ridiculous," she said, "Running around wearing a nice face, when behind closed doors you hate our guts. We can tell we make you uncomfortable, Mr. Breakneck. Shit, white people are silly."

A few minutes later, I came across it.

Date:	Job Opening:	Location:
8/10/01	Wanted: Top Flight Persuasive Copywriter for the Fastest Growing Direct Marketing Company in America, the American --	El Segundo, Ca.

The last word in the description was cut off, but I knew what was going on. They were replacing me.

"Oh, oh!" I shouted, tipping backwards in my chair, spilling a cup of tea on the floor.

"What happened?" Naima asked.

I pointed at the screen, and said, "Look. I'm getting the axe."

She peered over my shoulder. "Damn. That's fucked up," she said.

"Oh, not again. I knew it. I--." my voice trailed off, and I turned and laid my head against her stomach. And though I was relieved, was ready and willing to leave the American, I croaked in jest, "Why Naima? Why?"

She took my face in her hands, and held me, whispering, "Shhh, shhh. Baby, it's gonna be okay."

Her fingers massaged my temples, and I inhaled the sweet fragrance of cocoa butter lotion coming off her skin. "Oh, Naima," I said, "I've failed you again."

I pretended to sob, great chuffing swells of grief.

Hole's "Doll Parts" played on the stereo. The lead singer, Courtney Love, her voice a tired flesh wound, sang, "*I am doll eyes, doll mouth, doll legs …*"

I joined Love, and sang, my voice drenched in mock-pain, "*… I want to be the girl with the most cake.*" Then I cleared my sinuses, and said to Naima, "You know what this means?"

"What? You gonna cook dinner?"

"Yes, and more!" I looked out over Hollywood Boulevard and sighed. "Now, I have no excuse."

"No excuse? What? For your bad acting job. You ain't sad about no dumb job at the American."

"No," I said, adopting the orotund timbre of an English Lord, proclaiming, "Perhaps you're right, Ms. Brown. Henceforth, this hand," I pointed towards Hollywood Boulevard, my fingers shaped like a gun, "shall find its service

in the completion of works which are *good*. That is, my esteemed colleagues of the House, I shall endeavor to, first, blam!"—I fired the first salvo towards the Chinese Theater—"complete the ragged script of life that is lodged within me, my magnum primum. And, second, blam!"--I fired off the second shot like a machine gun, spraying the Walk of Fame with slugs--"I will show that America greatness is in its ideals, but that the legacy of slavery haunts the very pores of our--."

"Poppa, shut up."

I stopped my oration and Naima put a hand on my shoulder, "Maybe, you better make sure you're getting fired. Maybe they're just hiring someone to help you out?"

I stood up and looked out across the street. Above the Chinese Theater and the rows of apartment houses, the neon tubes of the Hollywood Roosevelt sign blinked in the night, the green glow casting a halo over the pedestrians trudging along the Walk of Fame.

She kissed me on the nose and said, "You don't need 'em anyway."

I turned and held her, my belly against hers. I kissed her neck and slid down on my knees, putting my head against her swollen midsection.

"Oh, I felt it move," I said.

"Yes, he's been doing that a lot today."

She caressed my hair, and she soothed me, but despite all my readiness to accept the inevitable, something still smoldered inside. My job was a guarantee for my growing family. Copywriting was my craft and words were the tools I

used to pay the bills. I was being paid to make the formulaic—"You know you want this widget! Now!"—seem essential. If I was anxious and contemptuous at work, my copy must also trace those emotions. How would I ever craft a strange cliché if I was steaming mad about being in some place like the Cage? Still, what burned me most with the American was they wouldn't tell me the truth: Was I being replaced?

"Why hide it?" I asked Naima, annoyed. "*Just tell me,* sheesh! Am I about to get the boot again, this time for failing grades as a junkmail writer?"

Naima kissed me on the cheek, and whispered, "Yes."

71.

The Weakest Link

I was nervous the next morning in the car. As I inched south on La Brea Boulevard towards El Segundo, I thought about endings. The end of my job. Perhaps the end of a part of my life I once yearned for, once believed was the culmination of my long-hours dreaming of being in print. Would I ever "forge in the smithy of my soul" something more than a cliché? Did anything compare to fatherhood? To the child growing inside Naima, the sincerest conception, the condensation of our blended strands of cell play and passion, the tissue that bound us together in legacy?

I had to know for certain. I wasn't going to wait around for three months until they found someone else. I wasn't going to stew in the Cage fretting over Dill's idea of the correct implementation of the exclamation point. This was it. I had to know. Was I in or out?

I caught up to Dill as he goose-stepped through the office around eleven and asked for a short meeting.

"Can't. No time."

"Later then?"

"Sorry. Can't. Great things happening."

Jehora passed by my desk a few minutes later. I reached for her arm and said, "Jehora. Can I speak with you for a moment?"

We walked outside and stood in the parking lot. Burple wore an orange scarf and matching orange lipstick.

The offshore breeze ruffled her hair, partially covering her eyes.

I was tired. Tired of all the useless urgency, the great frenzy in which every thing was created, as if the survival of the earth and all its peoples depended on the next *SwellClub!* email campaign. I was tired. I wasn't looking to compromise anyone else's job. I just had to know. I put it to Jehora as nicely as possible, "Jehora, you have to tell me."

Burple flipped her hair out of her face, her eyebrows raised, her eyes narrowed, and said, "Tell you what?"

Anxiety, like a great ball of twine, tightened in my gut, and strangled my words. I took a deep, steadying breath, and, more croak than question, said, "Are you about to replace me?"

She gathered her composure, smoothed her scarf against her neck, and said, "Why would you say that?"

I told her what I'd seen online, my voice flat, and my eyes searching her face for a sign.

The wind blew her hair across her face again. She looked down at the ground, took a shallow breath, and perhaps convinced of the rightness of her position, like a good manager, didn't answer my question directly, saying, "If I were you, I would start looking for another job. I did everything I could. I really fought for you, Isaac, but I think you're in over your head. I feel terrible. You got me hired. And the next writer might get the same response from Dill."

I remained silent, my gut churning.

"Look . . . everyone's working like mad. It's crazy in here." She paused, brought her right hand up to her chest, looked me dead in the eye, and, with the slightest wisp of sarcasm, said, "And it was kinda like a *weakest link* thing, you know?"

Right then my eyes filled up with hot thick fire, the sky flickered out, and everything became very quiet. I turned and walked back inside the Cage.

I'm the weakest link? I thought. Burple's reference to the popular game show was odd, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Indeed, Burple had a startling resemblance to the hostess: an iceberg of a woman whose frigid expression ranged from curt disdain to outright scowl and whose favorite word, enunciated with all the grace of a cymbal crash, was "pathetic"; a honeyed cousin to what was, quite possibly, the only other scripted portion of the show, her bathetic utterance of the eponymous phrase, "You are the weakest link, goodbye"; an incredibly redemptive and artful branding moment that synergized the show's title, and, represented at that quicksilver moment in time the sine qua non of the American public's obsession with the art of selfishness. For all these reasons, and more, I felt like setting everything on fire: the Cage, the American, El Segundo, Los Angeles, all of America, the whole world, until everything burned, burned, burned in one huge flame.

Instead, I called home.

"Naima?"

"Hey, baby."

"Naima, I was right. I'm getting fired. Again."

"Awwww, poor child. That's all right though. You don't want to work for those jerks anyway."

"Yeah. But they didn't--. I mean--. All I did was misspell Kauai. K-A-U. Uh."

"Mm-hmm. You need to brush up on your Hawaiian. How you gonna write the great American novel without it?"

"True," I sighed, looking around the Cage. Glad that I was leaving this dark place behind. It was only a matter of time before the American would be a distant memory.

"Why don't you come home, King Kameamea? You never know, you might get lei'd."

On the clogged Los Angeles' streets, though horns blared, drivers cut me off, wildly gesticulating with their middle fingers, and everything seemed to conspire towards greater frustration, greater rage, I felt strangely calm. *I didn't want the job anyway*, I thought, *why bother worrying about it?*

Streetlight banners advertised a play, *Contact*, at the Century Theater. The turquoise promotional cloth rippled slightly in the soft, warm breeze. I pulled over to the side of the highway--and let everyone pass me. I turned to the west and watched as the sunset blossomed in orange and red over the swirling Pacific.

That night, Mullen and a few other friends invited me out for a drink.

Two hours later, arm in arm with Naima, I walked slowly towards The Gas Light and could just make out the plaque to the left of the bar's open front door. It read:

BE HAPPY.

START HERE!

OPEN AT 6 AM

72.

The Concept of Race

On the drive home, Naima worried over her pregnancy. She'd felt a sharp pain that morning and visited the doctor as a precaution. Tests showed a slight tear in the placenta. The prognosis was cautious, but not cause for immediate action. But we worried. A placental abruption, the medical term, could prove very dangerous for both mother and child. Naima wasn't due for several more weeks. The slightest twinge in her belly, and we were going to the hospital.

The following morning, I updated my resume. Despite my rhetoric from the previous night, I had a baby on the way and wasn't about to sacrifice formula and diaper money for artistic pretense. So the day after my dismissal from the American, I made a few calls. An old contact from my days as a Marching Creative suggested I drop off a resume and my portfolio at her office on the Westside. I spent the morning putting it together while Naima talked. The classroom discussion of race, particularly its relationship to genetics, had her fascinated.

"Geneticists can't make up their minds," she told me.

As I was sliding a color printout of *Runaway Bride* into a plastic sleeve, I said, "Why? I thought they had already decided there was no biological basis for. That it was only a social construct."

"Well, the concept is bad science, it has no existence outside of our silly minds. That's why racism can exist even though there's no such thing as race. You know? People have intermingled for millions of years. But there could be

valid reasons for holding on to categories for medical research. Even though there's greater genetic difference within races than between races, finding better medicine for diseases that seem to be race-specific, like Tay-Sachs or sickle-cell, might suffer if there weren't studies that grouped populations by race."

"Great, so if our child has Tay-Sachs and sickle-cell anemia, scientists can fill out the forms more easily and chalk it up to Jewish-African heritage.

"Yup."

"What a relief."

"Well, you know, scientists aren't perfect. They aren't even all that objective. Why do you think there are so few African-Americans in the sciences. Your dad would probably say we don't value education. But hey, I didn't have chemistry in high-school. Nobody in my school went to college. Nobody in my family went to college before me."

"I guess it all comes down to money," I said.

"Redistribute the wealth, I say."

"Oy vay, what about me?"

"Yo, you have to work. Sorry."

Outside, the noontime crowds were unusually large around the Chinese theater. Workers were constructing a makeshift stage and a tiered pavilion for an audience.

I took La Brea south to the freeway onramp and headed west towards Santa Monica. As I drove, I recalled the time I left my father's house in Santa

Monica for New Life. I had changed my life. The fabric of my being had been rewoven with stronger, more stable threads. I believed the child cradled in Naima's womb, on the threshold of life, marked the beginning of a great new chapter in our life. I thought of how my father must have felt when I was born. How he must have looked from my mother to the slip of skin that marked my arrival in the world. How he must have gazed at my blind eyes and poured all his hopes into my future. He would make a good, doting grandfather. Perhaps my child would warm to his exclamatory "Greats!" There would be no generational rivalry. They would see each other with a little more respect than I had seen my father in my adolescence.

I dropped off the portfolio. My friend was out, so I left everything at the front desk. When I headed home, I stopped off at the supermarket for some vegetables. I picked out a smooth eggplant, its skin the texture of velvet, and called Naima to let her know I would be home soon.

73.

The Worst Silence

When I walked through the door, I knew something was wrong.

Her water had broken. I saw the viscous amniotic fluid and the red blood gush out down her brown leg, and I rushed across the living room.

I helped her put her hand over my shoulder and we made our way down the stairs to the street.

The Hollywood afternoon was hot, wet with the humidity of a tropical disturbance churning thermals up from the southern regions. I helped her into the car and adjusted her seat. She closed her eyes and I reassured her.

"It's ok, baby. The hospital is only five minutes away."

On a good day it was only five minutes away. But the event at the Chinese Theater made traffic a nightmare. Was Archie Moore finally getting a star?

"Move! Move" I cried uselessly.

Didn't they know?! Didn't they care there was a mother in labor?!

Hollywood Boulevard was jammed, blockaded between Highland and La Brea, bumper to bumper eastward toward East Hollywood and the hospital. I careened right down Selma, past the Mark Twain Hotel, screeching left onto Sunset, skirting by traffic on the sidewalk in front of the CNN building, weaving in and out of gridlock, flying down the middle of the street, past the Palladium and Warner Brothers Studio. But still all those cars, all those bastard copies from the sublimated assembly line idea of some repressed millionaire capitalist stood

before me and Naima's safe arrival at the delivery room. Smoke turned the oxygen air into a sheet of wavy carbon gas. In an earlier time, I might have thought there was some conspiracy, some secret network of idle vehicles arranged to snag Naima and me in a maleficent net. But I knew that wasn't the truth. Life was just full of frustration. So I honked and I cursed and passed traffic on the right.

Poor Naima, with her seat reclined all the way back, moaned, awful low wails that spurred me to more drastic moves through the smoking line of hulking metals. She began to cry out, "Oh, god. Oh, god." Her unusual, uncharacteristic appeal to a deity struck a deep chord in my chronically skeptical soul.

When we made it to the Emergency Room, a nurse helped her into a wheelchair, and I stayed in the lobby to fill out forms.

"Is that your friend?" the white clerk asked.

I might have returned her question with a heated rejoinder, with sarcasm, with a sharp word. But I just said, "No," and signed my name.

I rushed down the halls, and when I reached Naima, I could see she was already going through serious contractions. Her bed was in a large room, the beds divided by curtains. Machines hummed and beeped around her, giving off a staccato urgency. Two nurses arranged themselves at Naima's feet, holding her knees and giving her support, telling her to "Push! Push!"

I hadn't thought it would happen so fast. The material I'd reviewed in classes and books and on television shows suggested that the transition from

rupture to significant contractions usually took at least a few hours. Was I unnecessarily anxious?

I stood by Naima's side, caressing her head, feeling helpless. I kept her hair out of her eyes. I wiped the sweat off her brow with my hands. I whispered encouragement to her. Though the baby had announced plans for arrival, it had now decided to take its sweet time. Beside her in the hospital, while I reminded her to breathe and push!, my heart on fire with anticipation, I offered up my first sincere prayer since that day long ago on the beach. *Oh, let everything go right! Let this baby be healthy! Let Naima live! Please let her live!* I held her swollen hand. Nurses came in and out of the curtained area. The doctor came and checked her progress. At times, Naima seemed to rest, and closed her eyes and lay against the pillow. Hours passed. The contractions continued, but her womb would not let the baby go.

Finally, the doctor advised inducement.

The anesthesiologist brought over a metal tray, loaded the medicine into a syringe, and injected it into the iv drip. Then she turned Naima over and injected the epidural near her spine.

Moments later, I could see her relax a little, her eyelids becoming heavy.

Then, suddenly, she screamed. The contractions intensified, and the nurses held her legs and told her to push! push! push! She screamed again, and I held her poor head, telling her again and again that she was almost there! *Oh Lord, let her live! Please!* I prayed. She screamed again. One long, distended wail that cut through the hum of machinery, the shouts of the nurses, the murmur of

the entire wing of laboring women--cutting through time itself, and carving its sound in the shadowy room of my nightmares.

And then it was over.

I hugged her. She looked toward her feet, where our baby was ushered over to a table. I followed Naima's gaze and saw a nurse carry a bundle of life, bloody and pink and forked like us. I saw the nurse wrap the child in swaddling blankets and wipe off the blood and amniotic fluids. And then I heard something terribly strange.

Nothing. There was no sound. No sound of a baby crying, wailing, yearning for first breath, for life.

"My baby! What's wrong with my baby?" Naima yelled. "What's wrong with my baby! Why isn't she crying? She has to breathe. She has to breathe!"

I slumped on the bed against her, pressing her face to my chest. I held her in my arms while the doctor rushed a large rectangular machine over to where our baby lay, mute, and I saw him insert something into our baby's mouth and nose.

Naima screamed and struggled to get out of the bed.

My mouth hung open, wordless, and I did what I could to comfort her. I wanted to say a thousand things, but there was nothing to say. I held her as she stretched out her arms and screamed and tried to leap from the bed. A flurry of doctors and nurses worked across the room around what I can only imagine was a healthy baby, but had become as lifeless as the tray it lay on. Finally the doctor, eyes dimmed with defeat, came over to us, and said, "I'm sorry."

74.

Three Days

There is nothing more fearful than your own death, except the death of your child. For all the self-centeredness of this American era, many parents perform acts of incredible unselfishness in the service of their children. We hope to see our children grow physically and mentally, morally and spiritually. We hope to see them use their talents and fall in love. We want them to, above all, be happy. Now, our child, the true light of our lovemaking, was snuffed out, stamped down before it had a chance to spark.

A few hours later, we went home.

The spectacle in front of the Chinese theater had cleared out. The neighborhood was filled with the Friday night mix of commuters and tourists milling about on the Walk of Fame. I parked, and we walked up the long stairs to our third floor apartment. Each step an additional step away from the child we had left behind. We sat on the floor of our bedroom, the curtains drawn, and cried and shouted and held each other until we fell asleep, arms intertwined on the floor beside the bed.

In the morning, when I awoke, she was sitting on the balcony.

"Maybe today?" I wanted to suggest a distraction, a trip somewhere to escape the reminder of our tragedy. But I couldn't finish the statement. Though light birdsong drifted up from the trees and from the pink oleanders blooming across the street, our house was filled with heavy tones of sadness and silence.

The whites of Naima's eyes were shot through with broken vessels, their striations resembling the spread of a leafless tree in winter.

All day we sat speechless, our backs against the balcony wall. I could taste the pain in my mouth. I felt a hollow pressure billow out in my gut, a shape the size of a small child.

Milk seeped from her breasts and stained her shirts. When she saw the spreading circles, she brought her thumb to her mouth and turned and hid her face.

Maude called to offer her condolences. So did my parents. My father said, "Son, try and get out."

But we didn't go anywhere that day or the next.

On the third day after the baby died, I coaxed Naima outside. We drove to Hancock Park at sunset. I led her slowly past the creek, over the meadow, and up to the Mammoth exhibit. I hoped that if she felt up to it, we might walk through the museum. Look at the Picassos and the Mondrians and the ancient stone carvings, the nicked faces of Assyrians and Sumerians and Egyptians; a walk through the ages of art might lighten our spirits as we saw the evidence of enduring humanity.

We sat on a green bench beside the lake. Sparrows and blackbirds fluttered about among the high-standing reeds and danced in the air above the silvery tassels, the ends that had begun to break loose. The setting sun sparkled along the surface of the lake, making a brilliantine path stretching out toward the west. Bubbles popped at the surface of the water. The mammoth family was

there, in the same position as always. Papa Mammoth stuck in the mud. The Mama and Baby Mammoths on the shore. All three with their trunks stretched to their fullest extension, yearning for reunion.

"Naima," I said, "we can try again."

Her face was creased with lines, the whites of her eyes like the spreading branches of an autumn maple, their heavy red palmate leaves pressed against the glass of her inner world.

"Naima, we can try again," I repeated.

"I know, I know," she replied, irritated.

"Of course you do."

She searched across the lake, her eyes glittering as the Los Angeles sun played across her face.

"I never thought anything could be so painful," I said.

She turned and looked at me sharply. "Finally," she said, "You're growing up. See what your suburban world did for you?" She shook her head and put one hand on my knee. "It's like you were born in a giant Russian bubble doll. One by one, they pop. The illusion of your safe little self. Pop! The illusion of your safe little family. Pop! Your safe suburban neighborhood. Pop! The idea that you'll always be provided for. Pop! That you're entitled to everything you ever want. Pop!"

She shook her head and blinked in exasperation. "Welcome to the real world, Poppa."

Then she punched my cheek weakly.

I put my arm around her and looked out on the three lovely mammoths. The museums were closing, and many people--old and young, black and white, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern—flowed past in mostly segregated groups, though there were exceptions.

So we sat on the bench before those old mammoths, and we bickered and teased and did what all couples wish to do, if they're lucky: we grew old together.

"You piece of shit."

"Oui."

"You craphead."

"Oui."

"You silly old man."

"Oui."

And then we whisper.

"You my girl."

"Yes."

I said, "You my girl."

"Yes."

I said, "You will always be my girl."

"Yes."

And then we live.

Two weeks later, I was out looking for work and Naima left this message on the phone, "I got in! I got in! I got in!!"

75.

Moving, North

In late December, we moved to the Santa Cruz mountains, and Naima began taking classes at the UC. Soon after, I became a student also, a graduate English student at San Jose State. I would see if I could yet control something, even language, if I couldn't control anything else. And did I try.

One morning when I woke, Naima was out running, and I started writing in my journal.

Story idea: There is a condom with a real personality. He waits in a sort of recycled products Limbo. Then he gets his big chance. But the Maker puts him in the hands of an alcoholic father who hands out this poor condom to a teenage boy, who uses the condom badly. It breaks but the only one who knows it has broken is the condom. Too juvenile?

Naima walked through the front door. She asked me something, and I said, "Just a second, baby."

"Isaac," she said, calmly, "Here we go, again."

The theme of this story is the sentience of objects. If art is the nexus of technique, style, and product (as Prof. T claims), then my effect will flow from giving the

condom a human voice. If my purpose is to make readers care about a condom, how do I get them to believe in--

"Isaac!" she yelled. "What women wants to be married to a distant man?"

"You want to get married?" I asked.

"Not to you."

76.

The Question

A few months later, we settled into a routine: Naima taking classes and working in a lab, me gradually getting to know my peers at school, discovering mentors, and starting to teach two classes of Freshman Composition, training for a future talking up the features and benefits of complete sentences to new matriculates who, nearly to a person, made sure to let me know in their diagnostic essays that they did not like to read or write.

One Saturday night, our changed life seeming to require a real celebration; I surprised Naima and told her we were going out to dinner.

"Woo-hoo, 'cause I'm sick of your cookin.'"

"Watch it, Ms. Mean-mouth."

We jumped in the car, and soon enough were on the road heading towards 'Frisco. Bob Marley's "Stir It Up" played on the radio, and as the redwood trees and blackberry vines shuttled abruptly into the coarse weave of strip malls and semiconductor plants, we chatted with an ease established over many, many peaceful days sharing our tiny redwood cottage on the San Lorenzo River. Perhaps the natural pace of a smaller world had brought us closer than we'd ever been.

I reached across from the driver's seat and caressed her leg.

"Stop," she said, coyly.

"I can't help myself. I must touch you," I said.

She smiled and I quipped, "Let not the marriage of true minds admit impediments--."

"Yeah, yeah," she shot back, "Just don't crash the car, Billy."

"That is not my name," I replied with false indignation.

"Whatever," she said.

"Naima. Baby. You know my name, baby. You know my name."

"Yeah, yeah, Billy. But I actually want to eat in the city tonight. You know I'd rather be in the forest, so if you have to drag me out there to do some research, or whatever, can we actually get there in one piece?"

She teased me again, her left eyebrow rising ever so slightly, "You say 'You must touch me.' Let me ask you this: Are you just using me for my body, Mr. Man?"

I emptied my voice of all emotion. I had perfected the exact intonation of robot charm. And I told her, "Yes. I am. But ... I ... also ... admire ... your ... brain."

"Oh, Lord!," she cried.

But I continued anyway, droning, "For ... a ... scientist, ... you ... are ... unusually .... warm." I moved my head in smooth jerky motions in unison with the syncopated reggae beat.

"Well," she said, "You know scientists are a lot smarter and a lot more imaginative than you so-called Humanities people. We actually imagine stuff that isn't there, like energy. But every story you show me, some silly human is

fuckin' up, actin' a fool, and, by the last page, discovering some truism: 'Life is hard, but human kindness makes it all worthwhile.' Especially white writers with all that poor-me, I'm-so-spoiled-I-hate-myself crap. A bunch of sheep hunting for a way out the pasture." As she spoke, her hands seemed to orchestrate a great symphonic theme. "Aw naw, Isaac. If you want to write, at least say something different. Go somewhere else. Surprise me."

Her statements about white writers bounced off me. I knew she could be a loose cannon. "Most of the time," she has said, "I don't even think about the fact that you're white. It's my friends and family that won't let me forget it."

Her comment about my writing, however, made me sweat. I gripped the leather wheel. The sound of reggae was suddenly no consolation, the tension tightening between my dreams of greatness and the parlous reality. I felt a flush of heat on my neck, and chewed the inside of my left cheek. I was working on a novel that would capture something I believed was different: an interracial, romantic relationship between a white man and a black woman. But I reminded myself that I did not believe this book would change anything; that few readers, if I appealed to any, would change their thinking. I saw strange, unexamined ideas all the time as a college teacher. Really, I thought, would any novel move just one of my Freshman Comp. students to respond any differently to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*? There were no magic words anymore, I thought, and even if I knew them, I was uncomfortable with the notion that I might not be very persuasive. The comments in my student's essays--"All whites are racist."

and "Blacks have to join gangs because they can't afford video games."—were so frequent as to be nearly axiomatic.

"Besides," she told me, "Do you really want to be like everyone else? You're seeing something most white people don't see. You see white women grab their purses when I walk by them on the sidewalk. And that doesn't even count the blatant shit—the hospital that turned me away, that drunk redneck with the Confederate flag yellin' 'Nigger go home!' She looked out towards the city, her lips pursed together. She whispered, "Isaac, you have a glimpse into a world that the vast majority of white people never see except on television. To them, we are the lowest, and every black man and woman is a reminder of how fucked up the system is. I don't blame white people for wanting to look the other way."

I listened closely, the sentiments familiar. I knew there was the other part, the "double-bind," as one of the essays in the Freshman Reader called it. One of my students, in a pleasant display of verbal agility, had remarked, "Steele is saying it's like ... the more they try and become middle-class, the less black they become. The values collide. You can't lead a thug life and live in the suburbs at the same time." But the classroom was a long way from romance. And I wondered if I would ever be able to illuminate the experience of race in my own writing as well as I knew Naima's love illuminated my heart.

She shifted in her seat, leaning against the door, her chin lowered. "Do we always have to talk about this, Isaac? Can't we change the record?"

"No, no. Of course not." I reached for her hand, squeezed it, and said, "I just want you to know one thing: I *will* let them all know."

She turned it over, pulling on my ring finger, and said, "Okay, Isaac. Just don't forget about the road."

We arrived in the city.

"Now I see why we never come here," I told her.

As I drove the car through the dark dirty streets, I saw the grammar of corporate identity everywhere. Michelin and Safeway and Shell Oil signs mingle with billboards advertising movies with titles like "The Gods of War" and television shows called "Real Personalities!" People of all types crawled along the dingy streets.

"You--"

"Everyone is striking a pose."

I imagined each pedestrian with a rich inner life, with affections, with flaws. I wondered, remembering a sentence from Edward P. Jones, if there was really any way for Americans to be less American. We drove up Market and headed into the Lower Haight, traversing my parents' old hippie stomping grounds; the love beads and tie-dyes were still hanging from the windows of mom-and-pop stores, the pedestrians clothed in the monolithic uniform of hip disdain--a shabby chic tribalism mixed in with the occasional homeless person.

"Oh?," she replied. "And you're so different?"

I stiffened, my chin, my neck, my shoulders tightening. I managed to utter, "No. … Yes. I am."

"Are you sure?"

I stammered and in the silence visualized a taut yellow ribbon stretching from the red nose of a drunk asleep under a stack of wet newspapers to the shrill laughter of the metrosexuals who crowd the bars for tall golden glasses of Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. I finally said, "My grandfather always told me to remember Hillel, who said, 'For who are we, we, if we are not for ourselves, and what are we if, if we are not for one another? If not now, when?'"

Her response was instantaneous. "Yeah. When, Mr. Man? Besides didn't your grandfather actually practice Judaism?"

"You know I'm still Jewish. Culturally."

"Really? What does that mean?"

"I dunno. What's the criteria?

"Intelligence?"

I shook my head. "Too imprecise. What about wisdom?"

"Then you ain't Jewish, rabbi."

We parked and walked through the wet streets. The wind blew briskly and the fog gusted in the hills north of Market, beyond the Safeway.

We entered an Ethiopian restaurant, Axum, on Haight, and sat at a square table, above us on the wall a framed photo of an open field strewn with what looks like ancient marble columns.

I looked at the poster and said, "Did you know there was an ancient Thebes in Greece *and* Ethiopia? I wonder if the Oedipal complex has something to do with Africa."

She looked up from the menu and batted her eyes. She said, "Probably. That's what's wrong with white men: y'all want to fuck us. But the culture says you can't marry us. It would lower your status." As she shook her head in mock disdain, I wondered if anyone in the crowded restaurant had heard her. But when I looked around, I saw that everyone else was too involved with themselves. This comforted me. But she added, "Are you ready?" I fiddled with the menu, and her lips pursed together for a moment, but then she gently slapped my hand and said, "To order, silly. You haven't gone over to the other side yet."

But I persisted, "Do you think those ruins are Greek?"

She looked up and read the caption. "It says 'Department of Tourism: Ethiopia.'" She blinked in exasperation, returned to the menu, and sighed, "I never know what to eat in these places. What about the foo-foo?"

"Foo-foo? I don't see that on the menu," I told her.

The waitress appeared and explained that the fit-fit—not foo-foo—was actually one of the chef's specialties.

When the waitress had taken our order and left, I shook my head. "Foo-foo? You do have *some* imagination."

Her cheeks dimpled, and she turned her face slightly upward to one side, scrunching her nose like a topaz button. Then we sat and stared at each other. Her body suddenly seemed like a slender bowl of pears. Her shoulders taking

on a lean muscularity. And where she was pear-shaped, I must be an inverted Christmas tree, big on top and narrow on the bottom. Now, I wondered how a Jewish man romanced a Christian woman in the dusty Ukrainian shtetls? How an idolatrous Israelite, one who in his heart bore the brunt of the prophets' rage, loved the gods of hearth and home as he lay on his straw mattress in the hot squalor of ancient Jerusalem? I looked across the table and began to formulate a question, saying, "Baby--" But I paused, apprehensive, my mind suddenly purling with doubt.

"Go on, Isaac. What are you thinking? Men can share their feelings now too."

But the waitress arrived with the food and placed it in the middle of the table. There was a large platter with a central cup inside a ring of smaller cups. The rich aroma of garlic and pepper and tomato and lentils and roasted lamb rose from the plate. The steaming fit-fit sat in the middle. I tore a piece off the stack and handed it to Naima, who seized a piece of meat with the flat bread.

"Well," she said, "What were you going to ask me before the food came?"

I became anxious. My mind entered one of those places where imagination and reality almost touch. Amidst the clink of plates and the steady hum of diners, I felt myself detach from her, from our table at Axum ... I was suddenly in another place altogether, at rest in a tranquil turquoise sea. All around, the waters sparkled with prismatic brilliance, and a soft steady breeze cooled my face. Schools of fish, arrayed in a rainbow of colors, darted below. The sky was an illuminated manuscript. The clouds formed in a corner and I saw Moses

coming down Mount Sinai. The sun glowed from my forehead, the sun became a golden thumbprint pressing down on the crown of my head. It burned, it burned, it burned, it burned the page and--

"Isaac. Yoo-hoo." Naima's elbows were on the table and she was staring up at me, her mouth agape. "Yoo-hoo, Isaac."

I recovered my composure and said. "Sorry, I must have drifted off."

"I guess," she replied. "Your eyes glazed over and I thought I might have to give you mouth-to-mouth."

I looked down and moved my coffee mug. I was struck by the perfect, wet ring its small heft had left on the gray placemat, and I ran my middle finger around the edge.

"Sweetie," she said, touching my hand, "Are you all right?"

I stared at the table. My nerves seemed arrayed on the placemat like some image, like a Pollock painting, my mixed emotions shaken in a heavy can and dashed on the canvas of my heart. I asked, "Baby, do you ever wonder about your ancestors?"

She pulled her chin down and said, her eyes wide with what I imagined was vulnerability, "Who?"

I felt a spurt of acid indigestion, and held my stomach, groaning.

"Oh, Isaac. See? Your eyes want more than your belly can handle." Her voice was a gentle purr. "Poor baby," she cooed. The indigestion eased and I laughed with her. She took a sip of her coffee and said, "Well, if you're saying

do I wonder about my African ancestry? No, I don't. And what would I tell you anyway?"

I suddenly felt a surge of affection for her, for her uncommon intelligence, for her candor so unlike the passive-aggressive rope around which my family tightened their love. I thought at that moment I was ready to spend the rest of my life with her. I felt like my heritage—the millennia of exile, the oppression of Pharaoh and Caesar and Czar and Hitler—united us in a bond of endurance. I looked up from my coffee and said, "I know there's pain, baby. I understand."

But her response was immediate, "What? What type of shit is that?"

"But I'm Jewish."

"Hah!" she cried. "To black people, you're just as white as anybody else. Yeah, you had it bad in Europe, but in America? Please."

"But don't you think we share something ... a struggle?"

"Share something?" she asked, rhetorically, "Yeah, we share a lumpy mattress, but the only reason you know anything at all about being black in America is because you live with me." Her eyes narrowed, and a ridge formed above the bridge of her nose. She brought her hands together over her food, and when she spoke, her words shot out of her mouth in a furious whisper, "Sometimes I just *hate* white people." Then she slowly leaned back in her chair. And after a few moments, she moved forward until she was as close to my face as the table would allow. She said, "I know you don't want to believe it, maybe you want to think in some grandiose way that you're different, but you're not." She picked up her coffee cup and held it just below her lips as she talked. Steam rose

but she did not blow or sip or put the cup down. I wondered why she didn't do any of these things. It bothered me that she just held the object. I would have liked her to make a decision one way or the other. But she continued to hold the cup, her arm crooked at what appeared to be an uncomfortable angle, her fingers awkwardly gripping the thick loop of the ceramic handle. Finally she said, "Isaac, get over it. You're white. So what? And? No one cares but you. And you can't save the world just because you're dating me. Wouldn't that make you just as racist as everyone else?"

I continued to stare at her cup. It was an indigo blue but appeared black in the minimal lighting of the restaurant. I thought I saw several small chips at the base, and I wondered if it was about to crack.

"Isaac? Hello?" She asked. "You are really off in la-la land."

"Sorry," he said.

"Let's talk about something else. I'm so sick of this topic."

If there was ever a straight line between my mind and heart, it was now unraveled and full of slack. I took a deep breath and scratched my left palm with my right index finger. I was ready to drop the subject of race, again. I said, "Okay. Sheesh. I am a frickin broken record!" Embarrassed, exasperated—I took two, quick short breaths. Then I took her hand and, the world a spinning pin-wheel with Naima at the center, cried, "Would you tell me about your obsessions? Would you break me off something, something about biochemistry? What about your pet project apoptosis? Are the other eggheads at UCSC warming to it?"

She was amused by my language, and swung my hand slightly to and fro. She grinned and said, "'Break off something, something'? Oh, man," she chuckled, "You are so white."

I recoiled for just a moment, for a moment I felt the space between us. But then I persisted with my question, "So what about cell death?"

She was eager and dismissive at the same time, replying, "Man, that isn't even on the radar screen. Everyone at Santa Cruz wants to work on the Human Genome Project and RNA and--."

"Sequencing the cockroach?"

"Yeah. They don't realize if you can find out why cells are programmed to die, you might be able to discover why they're programmed to live too."

"I want to *live*!"

She turned my hand over and ran her finger along my life line, my love line, the little lines that elude all but the most inquisitive fortune tellers. She continued to trace, slowing to an exquisite dance, the whorled tip of her hand, a smooth match on the hollow of what—in an earlier, analogical time-- true believers called the soul. She looked up into my eyes, and all were pools of open water. We said nothing. The clatter of plates and chatter of niceties and furious laughter shook the air, but we were not of that place. Where we touched, we entered another room, a room everpresent, everhere. It is bright with sealight, and the air is sifted with tart salt, with the grit of beachloam. We savor the space where we join. Our joy is a light fantastic on the fantasia of our hearts. We dig our toes and bury our heads in the sand where we breathe.

77.

The Bridge

On the walk to our car, a homeless man, his brown jacket stained nearly black with dirt, his shoes ripped, stopped us and said, "Oh, man. This is something I have waited to see: a white man with a black woman. This is *beautiful*." It is everywhere, I thought. How would I ever handle a family with mixed children, a blended boat in the convent of Our Lady of America, the Sheep of the Narrow Pasture? I blinked as I imagined the nomenclature for a Book of Mock Heroic Sermons. *Canticles for Followers and Whomever Will Lay Fallow In The Grass.* The homeless man reached for our hands and united us in a firm embrace. "Don't be scared white man," he told me. "I'm with you. I'm glad to see this. This *is* beautiful." His eyes were bloodshot, his face was grizzled and pockmarked, and he looked into my eyes and said, "Remember, she's your soul. Your *soul*." He released our hands. "I want to show you something," he said. He pulled up his shirt. There was a deep purple wound in his side. "This is what I'm dealing with." He lost his balance and I caught him. He smelled like he'd bathed in a tub of bourbon and piss. I held him up, and the man said, "Thank you, brother." He regained his balance and asked me, "Can you help me out?" I dug into my pockets, feeling loose change and keys, and came up with nothing. For an instant, the man looked at me in disappointment and then walked away. After he'd gone a few paces, he turned around and, waving his index finger, said, "That's okay, that's okay. You two are beautiful. Beautiful! Never forget

that." He turned and approached another couple, their clothes lambent in the night with heavy cotton dyed to a lush gray. The man was tall, and his salt-and-pepper hair glittered under the yellow streetlight. When the homeless man reached their side, the man pulled his woman close and shook his head. They continued walking, hurrying past the homeless man's outstretched fingers, past us, and down Haight, where they disappeared behind the flapping peace flags of *Butterfly Effect*, then the latest in Vegetarian cuisine, the chef notorious for manipulating seitan with brown gravy and capers.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

Naima looked at me sharply and said, "And? Why didn't you give him any money?"

"Did you smell him?"

"Yeah. So?"

"He's just going to use it to get a drink."

"Of course he is. You would too. It's cold out."

I shrugged. Naima found a dollar and jogged up the street. When she returned, she walked right past me, turning her head as she went by, and letting out a muffled, high-pitched, "Hmmmph!"

I trotted after her and caught up in front of the car, apologetic. "Well, I've really made a fool of myself tonight."

"That's okay. You're my fool for now." She gently socked my shoulder.

"If a fool would persist in his folly—"

"If men would learn how to be funny."

I was silenced. But I couldn't long contain my excitement and finally cried out, "Oh, let me make it all up to you!"

At the Golden Gate Bridge, the apparatus of cables and guide wires and railing looked like a giant red loom, and the twinkling yellow lights of the skyscrapers and apartment towers flickered in the distance like a million tiny lighthouses. We held hands as we walked out along the sidewalk that ran back toward the city. Fog shuttled through the bridge as if part of some endless gray fabric. We stopped about halfway across, and I put my arm around Naima. The center of the bridge was nearly empty of pedestrians. We leaned against the red guardrail. Then we looked up together. The sky and the hot yellow stars were somewhere beyond the fog. And I was momentarily overawed by the confluence of that gigantic manmade structure and its infinitesimal spot in the great sway of ocean and sky and all the stars of the Milky Way and even beyond those spaces yet uncreated in the strange engines at the end of the universe. Naima looked out into the dark ocean, and the wind flipped her jacket collar. I smoothed it against her neck, straightening the crease. Then I kissed her softly on her left earlobe.

I whispered, "What I really wanted to ask you back there in the restaurant was not about Africa or race or anything like that. I always seem to get stuck on that stuff. It's like a magnet."

She stretched her arm behind my head, running her fingers through the hair at the base of my scalp, and said, her voice low and easy, "What did you want to ask me?"

Suddenly, I felt the presence of that great bridge as incredibly symbolic. If I were writing a story, I imagined I would misuse the bridge, and it would become cumbersome and forced. I was beginning to notice how predictably my mind worked. And although I was anxious, my hands trembling, and my heart was banging away in my chest, I did what I believed my whole life had been leading to: I got down on one knee, took Naima's hand, and asked one simple question.

But it came out all wrong. I stammered. A whole family of frogs got stuck in my throat. Finally I said, "Naima, do you think a white man and a black woman should marry?"

"Why not? Why focus on their skin anyway?"

"Not as a focus, but because—."

"What are you saying, that you're only attracted to me because—."

"No," I said, still on my knees. "No. I'm—."

"That you love me because of how I look?"

"No!"

"No?"

"I mean! N-yet! Shit! You see me down here. Do you think I'm down on my knees to tie my shoes? Do you think I want to hippity-hop back to the city or something?"

"Isaac, get up here."

"No," I said, sullenly.

When it was over, we walked to the car and drove back over the bridge, through the city, the suburbs, and up into the woods.

And when we lay down together that night, in the darkness of our forest home under the heavy scent of the redwoods, I wrapped my arms around her warm body and held her until I could hear her breathing slip into the rhythms of sleep. The window was open. The wild dissonance of the river tapped the air and made of my mind a resting place. I placed my hand on the soft smooth curve of her hip, and I pushed my nose against the sweet musk of her hair. I closed my eyes, and my mind was a bell ringing, ringing, ringing with the news and the future and the answer.

When I awoke in the morning, I heard bacon sizzling. I could almost taste the hot, buttery toast and warm, sweet hot cakes as their aromatic rings broke and drifted through our small cabin, sifting into the bedroom through the strain of home.

Naima was singing in the kitchen.

Non, rien de rien, non je ne regrette rien.

Her singing voice was slightly out of tune, but the practiced care with which she turned her 'r's' and the exoticism of this French syllable on my American ears were suddenly arousing. I rolled on my back, and she stepped into the bedroom wearing one of my blue collared shirts and pinstriped boxers.

"Hey," she said, "You hungry?"

"No."

"Good. 'Cause I ain't cookin' for you anyway."

"Non?"

"Oui."

"Is that a yes?"

"Maybe."

"What? You still have doubts?"

"Yeah," she told me, her chin at an indignant slant.

I couldn't actually tell if she was being serious or flip unless I looked into her watery eyes. I looked to the side and asked, "Why?"

"'Cause I don't want to know the future. Where's the beauty in that?"

78.

Practice

One time I went and heard an amazing vibraphonist, Stephon Harris, at a club on Venice Boulevard. I went with Naima, my father, and K., and during the intermission my father bought me a book, *The Definitive Guide to Playing the Trumpet*. We talked very little that night, my father and I. He went home with K. after the first set, but I stayed on with Naima, the music acting upon our emotions like a very strong tea. Something like *Passiflora incarnata*. Our anxieties about Naima's second pregnancy, the baby's progress, the plans for delivery in a hot tub in our living room overlooking San Francisco and the Bay Bridge —everything seemed to drain away. We stayed. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do, nobody to be. And well after midnight, when the band finally closed down for the evening, I saw Mr. Harris in the lobby and asked if he would autograph the book my father had generously purchased. He did, and this is what he wrote, "There are no secrets, Isaac. Practice, practice, practice."

When I realize how my life has changed, how my relationship with Naima has changed my life, and see the evolution of experience from my first days playing ball with my dad in Tarzana Park to the present moment as I write, I recognize that the only passages that matter are life and death. And marriage. I wrote the poem you'll find below after the wedding, after Grandma was gone, just before the little one who would live came into this world. I finished it one night just after the midnight, before heading into San Jose to lead another class in Freshman Composition, or, as the Dean would have it, 'Written Communica-

tion.' Soon after, I read it to Naima. And when I read my voice was strong and confident. I held my head high, my spine long and straight. I read with feeling, with poise, with generosity. And when I had finished, there was nothing else to say.

Practice

I. Wedding

"How are you going to kiss a black woman?"

As I answer, Uncle Dennis carries Samuel away and I hear a low moan where the redwood trees sway above this Sebastopol garden wedding.

When the ceremony ends, my grandmother wheels home to her shabby apartment, "nigger heaven" she calls it. And Willa pulls me aside and remarks how wonderful it was to film the bridal dressing room, my mother's bedroom: Naima naked, her mother, her aunt, her sister making sure every seam, every petal, every braid was just so. She says, "I've never been around so many. I felt so white."

The bass player called three times to make sure it wasn't raining out west toward Bodega Bay. Bass players are always the most sensible musicians, the most practical about problems associated with power.

But my heart is a swinging door.

I have broken the glass and jumped the broom. My grandmother's oak rocker, her red velvet Victorian settee, her daguerreotype print, "The Aristo-

crats"—these fine things cannot conceal her grief for sisters and brothers whose letters stopped in '32,

or the memory of great-grandma fleeing into their North Hollywood closet, Cossacks, Christians, Christ knows who in pursuit. The indelible echo of blood in every knocking fist against the door.

My grandmother tells me, "I just don't want to be here anymore."

Later, we skirt the Sierras, and I quip, "The white side looked pretty uncomfortable." And my wife reminds me of when we first met and Cousin Tanja asked, "Is it true what they say about their dicks?"

II. Honeymoon

We arrive but Lake Tahoe stiffly resists honeymoons and parties sent out for beer and gondola passengers rising into the sky, dizzy with slotted achievement, their eyes spinning to gauge the mountain's odds.

I sit perplexed at the mixture of sublime and subliminal, sipping forgettable cups of Lipton at Caesar's, the Mozart muzacked amongst the gold lamé blouses and Wal-Mart slacks stacking their porcelain with beef shank, spooning glistening coins of mac and cheese into their offspring's hungry mouths.

That night, high in our Harrah's room, we hold hands. Sunset. I search the jagged horizon for snow but it is July. Waterfalls drape the slopes in a twisting braid.

There is a steady beat, my wife's pulse ticking in the nuptial afterglow, the fierce alternation of blood and silence.

III. Marriage

In the morning, the test is pink. When we sit on the shore, our fingers

entwined in the water, something glints beneath the surface, a ripple in the lake, this mirror in an old house waiting to be constructed,
this home we—

scions of Moses and Mwindo,
The G.'s Ammons and Gershwin,
antecedents both steerage and middle passages—
worshipful of God and gods—
we hold the hammer, and

I see our house, our new family arise--

But there is my Grandmother's remark, a long hatchet
in a chamber filled with mirrors. Once, when I write
these words on a pad of paper, "Grandma, Naima is pregnant,"
she said, "What did you go and do that for?"

My wife draws a line in the sand around my feet, pushing the dirty grains of granite with her small hands until she has made a castle with crenulations and ramparts, even a moat.

But a sudden wave washes over us, and we are swamped with alpine water.

I try to resist getting wet, but she pulls me in, pulls me against her warm arms, against her soft face, pulls me gently against her lips. I linger and we play at this joining place, starlight we

float inessential
searching for the weave in the water.

Then she catches me with my eyes open,
and says, shaking her head, "Do you have to kiss like that?"
Suddenly unsure, I change
the subject. I remember Samuel's

question. "You know
what I told that crazy kid?"

She grins and her face lights
a fire where all my foolish fear
forges the shape of a child.

"What? You use a mirror?
You use caution? You--."

"No,' I said,
'I told him
I've had lots of practice.'"